It's what's outside that matters.
Airhead
Airhead

Airhead

Airhead
'Emerson Watts,' caled my first-period Public Speaking teacher, Mr Greer, startling me from the light doze into which I'd drifted.

Well, whatever. Do they really expect us to be alert at eight fifteen in the morning? Come on.

'Here,' I caled, jerking my head from the top of my desk and surreptitiously feeling the side of my mouth, just in case I'd been drooling.

But I guess I didn't do it surreptitiously enough, since Whitney Robertson, seated with her long, tanned legs crossed beneath a desk a few feet away from mine, snickered, and hissed,

'Loser.'

I threw her a dirty look and mouthed, Bite me.

To which she responded by narrowing her heavily made-up baby-blue eyes at me and mouthing back smugly, You wish.

'Em,' Mr Greer said with a yawn. I guess he'd been up pretty late last night too. Only I'm guessing it wasn't because he'd been frantically finishing his homework for this class, like I was.

'I wasn't calling rol. It's time for you to give the class your two-minute persuasive
oral piece.

We're going in reverse alphabetical order, remember?'

Great. Just great.

Chagrined, I slid out from behind my desk and made my way to the front of the room

while the rest of the class tittered. Al except Whitney, I saw. That's because she had dug her

compact mirror out of her bag and was gazing at her own reflection. Lindsey Jacobs, seated in

the row beside hers, stared at Whitney admiringly and whispered, 'That shade of gloss is

so you.'

'I know,' Whitney murmured to her reflection.

I fought off a reflexive urge to gag - because I was about to speak in public, not because

of their exchange . . . although I guess that could have had something to do with it - and turned

round to face the room. Twenty-four sleepy faces blinked back at me.

And I realized I had completely forgotten the speech I'd been up half the night writing.

'Al right, Emerson,' Mr Greer said, 'you've got two minutes.' He looked down at his

watch. 'And . . .'

Amazing. The second he said that, my mind went even more blank. Al I could think was .
. . how did she know? Lindsey, I mean. That that shade of lipgloss was so right on Whitney? I

have been alive nearly seventeen years and I stil have no idea what shade of lipgloss looks
good on me . . . or anybody else, for that matter.

I blame my dad. He's the one who gave me a boy's name to begin with, since he'd been so

sure I was going to be one - despite what the ultrasound had shown - because I kicked my

mom so much while I was in the womb. Dad insisted on naming me after his favourite poet,

which is what you get when your father teaches university-level English literature. I guess my

mom was stil high off her epidural or something, because she totaly let him, even after the

ultrasound turned out to be right. So Emerson Watts is what it says on my birth certificate.

I know. I was a victim of sexual stereotyping in utero. How many girls can claim that?

' . . go,' Mr Greer said, turning on his oven timer.

And just like that, al the research I'd done on my assigned topic the night before came

flooding back.

Phew.

'Females,' I began, 'make up thirty-nine per cent of people who play interactive computer
games, and yet only a small fraction of the games created by the estimated thirty-five-billion-
dollar worldwide gaming industry is geared towards female players.'

I paused . . . but it didn't matter.

I guess I couldn't really blame them. It was barely nine in the morning, after all.

Even Christopher, who lives in my building and is supposedly my best friend, wasn't paying
attention. He was in his normal seat in the back row, and he was upright.

But his eyes were closed.

'A study,' I went on, 'by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA showed that

the percentage of computer degrees granted to women has now dropped to an all
time low of

less than thirty per cent. Computer science is the only field in which women's
participation is

actually decreasing over time . . . '

Oh, God. No one in first-period Public Speaking was awake now but me. Even Mr

Greer's eyes had drifted shut.

Terrific. Way to be part of the problem, Mr Greer, and not the solution.

'Many researchers believe this is due to our educational system failing to engage
girls in the

sciences - particularly computer science - during the middle school years,' I battled on, staring

directly at Mr Greer. Not that he noticed. He was now gently snoring.
Great. Just great. I mean, I'd been slightly psyched when I'd gotten my topic, because the truth is, I like computer games. Wel, one computer game, anyway.

'So what can be done to keep girls interested in gaming,' I went on desperately, 'which studies show increases problem-solving and strategic abilities, and also helps develop social interaction skills and cooperative play?'

There was no point, I realized. Realy.

'Wel,' I said, 'I could strip off my clothes and reveal to you that under my jeans and sweatshirt I'm actually wearing a tank top and short shorts, much like Lara Croft from Tomb Raider . . . only mine are flame retardant and covered in glow-in-the-dark dinosaur stickers.'

No one stirred. Not even Christopher, who actually has a thing for Lara Croft.

'I know what you're thinking,' I went on. 'Glow-in-the-dark dinosaur stickers are so last year. But I think they add a certain je ne sais quoi to the whole ensemble. It's true short shorts are uncomfortable under jeans and hard to get off in the ladies' room, but they make the twin thigh holsters in which I hold my high-calibre pistols so easy to get to . . .'

The oven timer dinged.

'Thank you, Em,' Mr Greer said, yawning. 'That was very persuasive.'
'No, Mr Greer,' I said with a big smile. 'Thank you.'

It's a good thing my parents aren't paying for my tuition - I'm on a ful academic scholarship at Tribeca Alternative - because I have true reservations about the quality of the education I am receiving here.

I went back to my seat as Mr Greer asked - himself mostly, I guess - 'Now, who do we have next? Oh, yes. Whitney Robertson?' Mr Greer smiled. Because everyone smiles when they say Whitney's name. Except me. 'You're up.'

Whitney - who'd gone for a quick nose-powdering after the oven timer went off - closed her compact with a snap and uncrossed her legs. I knew I wasn't the only one in the room who got a flash of her leopard-print thong as she did so. Suddenly, everyone seemed to be wide awake.

'Here goes nothing,' Whitney said with a laugh, and she unfolded her long, lean frame out from beneath the desk, and sauntered - no, really, even though she was wearing four-inch platform heels. How do girls do that? If I tried to saunter in four-inch heels (even in two-inch heels) I'd trip and fall flat on my face - down the aisle to the front of the room, her short, ruffled skirt swaying behind her. When she turned to face us, there wasn't an eye
in room that
wasn't on Whitney.

Except Christopher's, I noticed, when I turned around to check. He was still soundly asleep.

'And . . . go,' said Mr Greer, adjusting the oven timer.

'My topic is about why I,' Whitney began in a sing-song sweet voice completely unlike the one she uses when she is advising me to bite her, 'don't believe in the falacy that Western civilization's standards for female beauty are too high. Lots of women complain that the fashion and film industries are attacking the self-esteem of young girls and older women alike. They want these industries to employ more, quote, average-sized women, unquote. I say this is ridiculous!'

Whitney tossed some of her long blonde - dyed, apparently. At least according to my little sister Frida, who knows about things like that - hair and asked, her blue eyes glittering with indignation, 'How is it an attack on any woman's self-esteem to promote a healthy weight - which scientists have determined as a body mass index of below twenty-four point nine - as beautiful? If some women are too lazy to go to the gym because they sit around
all day playing video games, well, that's their problem. But they can't then turn around and blame those of us who take proper care of our bodies of being sexist or holding them to impossible standards of beauty . . . especially when so many of us are living proof that those standards aren't impossible at all.'

My jaw dropped. I looked around to see if anyone else was as stunned as I was. This was Whitney's interpretation of the topic Mr Greer had assigned her for her two-minute persuasive piece? That normal-sized women should stop blaming the media for hyping stick-thin models and actresses as the beauty ideal?

Apparently I was the only one in the class who thought she'd gotten it wrong. At least if the rapt way everyone else (the male half of the class, anyway) was staring at Whitney's - admittedly extremely perky - boobs was any indication.

'If wanting to look as beautiful as someone like Nikki Howard, for instance,' Whitney went on, naming the current It girl in the beauty-and-fashion scene, 'was really so wrong, would women be spending an estimated thirty-three billion dollars a year on weight loss, another
seven billion on cosmetics, and three hundred million or more on cosmetic surgery? Of course

not! People aren't stupid! They know that, with a little effort and maybe a little more money,

they can be as attractive as - well, me.'

Whitney flung her long hair behind one shoulder, then went on, 'Some people -'
insert the

name Emerson Watts here, the look she sent in my direction implied - 'might think it's stuck-up

of me to call myself attractive. But the truth is, beauty isn't just about being five foot ten and a

size zero. The most important accessory a girl can have is

confidence . . . and I guess I just have plenty of that!'

Whitney lifted her shoulders in an innocent shrug, and almost all the boys - and half the

girls - in class sighed as they gazed longingly at her. I whipped around in my seat and was

relieved to notice that Christopher's head had lolled forward in sleep. One guy -

out of

fourteen - was safe, anyway.

I turned back around in my seat just in time to hear Whitney say, 'And the truth is, contrary

to what critics tell us about the ideal being unachievable and women dying to be thin, the only

thing killing women in this country is obesity, which is at epidemic proportions.'
Everyone in class nodded in agreement, as if all this made perfect sense. Which it so didn't.

At least, not to me.

'Wel,' Whitney said, 'that's about it. Was that two minutes?'

Right on cue, Mr Greer's oven timer dinged. He beamed and said, 'Exactly two minutes.

Excelently done, Whitney.'

She simpered again and started back to her seat. Since I saw that no one else was going
to say anything - as usual - I stuck my hand in the air. 'Mr Greer.'

He looked at me tiredly. 'Yes, Miss Watts?'

'Seriously,' I said, lowering my hand. 'I thought the purpose of the two-minute persuasive
oral piece was to persuade our audience of something using facts and statistics.'

'Which I totaly did,' Whitney said as she slid into her seat.

'Al you did,' I shot back, 'was make everyone in this class who isn't as skinny and perfect
as Nikki Howard feel totaly bad about themselves. How about mentioning the fact that most
of us are never going to look like her, no matter how hard we try or how much money we
spend?'

The bel rang, loud and long. I guess I'd been asleep longer than I thought, because that
period seemed to have flown by.
And as everyone sprang from their desks to get to their next class, Lindsey got up and said
to me, 'You're just jealous.'
'Totaly,' Whitney said, running her hands over her slender thighs. 'And you got one thing
right, Em: no matter how hard you try, you're never going to look this good.'
Cackling with laughter at her own witticism, Whitney hurried from the classroom with a
giggling Lindsey in tow, leaving me alone with Mr Greer. And Christopher.
'You can bring up those points next week if you want, Em,' Mr Greer volunteered
helpfully, 'when we do rebuttal persuasive pieces.'
I just glared at him. 'Thanks, Mr Greer,' I said.
He shrugged and looked sheepish. I looked at Christopher, who was slowly waking up,
and said, 'Thanks to you too. You were a big help back there.'
Christopher, blinking groggily rubbed his eyes. 'Dude, I heard every word you said,' he
said.
'Oh, realy?' I raised an eyebrow. 'What was my assigned topic again?'
'Um . . . I'm not sure.' Christopher's smile was slightly crooked. 'But I know it had
something to do with short shorts. And glow-in-the-dark dinosaur Page 8 Meg Cabot:
Airhead stickers.'
Slowly I shook my head. Sometimes I think high school is just something society puts teenagers through as a sort of test to see if we've got the stamina to handle the real world.

It's a test I'm pretty sure I'm failing.

Airhead
Two

You would think on weekends I'd get a respite. You know, from the Whitney
Robertsons

of the world.

The problem is, my little sister is turning into one. A Whitney, I mean.

Oh, she's not quite as bad as the Queen of Mean. Yet. But she's slowly getting
there. As I

realized to my horror on Saturday morning, when Mom said I had to go with her
to the Stark

Megastore grand opening, because at fourteen Frida's stil 'too young' to do stuff
like that by

herself.

Substitute the word sily for young in the sentence above and you'll get my mom's
gist.

Not that Frida is actualy mentaly diminished in any way. Like me, she got into
Tribeca

Alternative High School on an academic scholarship.

She's just turned into a Whitney Robertson wannabe . . . or, more technicay, a
member

of the Walking Dead. That's the term Christopher and I use to describe the
majority of our

classmates.

To most people, zombies are the undead. But to Christopher and me, zombies are the
popular people at TAHS, who are very similar to the undead, in that they have no soul or

personality. But they are, technically, alive. However, because they have no actual interests of their own (or if they do, they squelch

them in order to fit in), and merely pursue those that they think will look best on their college apps, they're zombies.

Ergo, the Walking Dead is what makes up the majority of the student population of

Tribeca Alternative High School.

It was kind of frightening to watch your own sister turn into one of the Walking Dead. But

unfortunately, there really isn't anything you can do to stop it from happening. Except try to

embarrass her as much as possible in public.

Which would be why Frida (it was Mom's turn to do the naming when my little sister was

born, and so she got stuck being called Frida, after Frida Kahlo - Mom's a women's studies

professor at NYU - a feminist Mexican painter best known for her self-portraits featuring her

uni-brow and moustache) was as thrilled to have me along to the Stark Megastore grand

opening as I was to be going with her.

Um, not.
'Mo-om!' she whined. 'Why does Em have to come with me? She's going to ruin everything.'

'Em is not going to ruin everything,' Mom said, rolling her eyes at Frida's dramatics. 'She's just going to make sure you get home al right.'

'It's TWO BLOCKS away,' Frida pointed out.

But Mom wouldn't budge. There've been people protesting outside the new Stark Megastore since before it was even built, back when the neighbourhood found out that's what would be replacing Mama's Fruit and Vegetable Stand (located in the middle of an abandoned lot) on the corner of Broadway and Houston. Situated just two streets over from our university-subsidized apartment on West Third and La Guardia Place, Mama's was where we bought al our lettuce and bananas, since you can't trust the produce at the local Gristedes, and the gourmet food store over on Broadway, Dean and Deluca, was way too expensive.

Mom and I weren't the only ones who were mad when we found out what was going up in that empty lot. The whole community banded together to save Mama's, and demanded that Stark get out.

But despite all the picketing, letters to the editor, sabotage of the construction site by the
ELF, the Environmental Liberation Front (I swear I had nothing to do with it, despite what

Mom and Dad seem to think), and promises of a community-wide boycott, Mama's got

pushed out, and a Stark Megastore - featuring three stories of CDs, DVDs, video games,

electronics and books (the smallest and most inaccessible part of the store) - went up,

guaranteed to put all the locally owned shops that already sold these things out of business with

its steep discounts, endless supply . . .

. . . and publicity stunts, like the one today: a supersized grand opening, including free food

and drinks (Stark Cola and Stark Cookies and Pretzels), with live performances on all three

floors by some of the hottest young entertainers of the moment, followed by an opportunity to

get a personally autographed CD from them.

Which was why Frida was so determined to go.

Because unlike the rest of our family - and residents of our community - Frida

was thrilled about the new Stark Megastore opening up within spitting distance of her

bedroom window (not that Frida would ever do something as déclassé as spit). She could not

have cared less that Mama's had relocated to a windy, desolate corner way over in Alphabet
City, nowhere close to walking distance to our apartment building, or that we were being
forced to eat wilted lettuce and brown bananas from Gristedes.

'Nothing's going to happen,' Frida kept insisting to Mom. 'I'll look out for ELF
protestors.

I'll wear my bike helmet, if I have to.'

Mom just rolled her eyes. 'It's not ELF I'm worried about, Frida,' she said. 'It's
Gabriel Luna.'

Frida's round cheeks (wel, they are. What can I say? Round cheeks - like stick-
straight
brown hair, brown eyes, medium height and weight, and size-nine feet - is our
genetic destiny,

the way high cheekbones and perfect everything else are Whitney's) instantly
turned bright red.

'Mo-om!' she cried. 'Whatever! He's, like, twenty. He's not going to be interested
in a kid

like me.'

That's what her lips said. But anyone could tel by the glint in her eyes that Frida
didn't

actualy believe this. She honestly thought Gabriel Luna was going to fal madly
in love with her

as he personaly autographed her CD. I could tel. I used to be fourteen after al, just
two and

a half short years ago.

So it was a good thing when Mom replied, 'Then you won't mind bringing your
sister

along. Just in case.'

'Just in case what?' Frida wanted to know.

'In case Gabriel Luna invites you to a party Page 10 Meg Cabot: Airhead back at his
penthouse.'

You could tel this was exactly what Frida had been hoping would happen. Not that she'd

ever admit it. Instead she snarled, 'Gabriel doesn't have a penthouse, Mom. He's not into the

trappings of fame.'

When I burst out laughing at trappings of fame, Frida glared at me and said, 'Wel, he's

not. He lives in a studio apartment somewhere here in NoHo. He's not one of those music-

company-fabricated pretty boy-band types Em hates so much. He's a singer-songwriter. Even

though he's already a sensation back in his native London, hardly anyone outside England

knows who he is.'

'Except everyone who reads COSMOgirl!, evidently,' I pointed out. 'Since you just

quoted that verbatim from their article on him last month. Including thetrappings
of fame part.'

'How would you know, Em?' Frida demanded snarkily 'I thought you never read teen
magazines. I thought you only read your lame Electronic Gaming Monthly, or whatever.'

I sighed. 'Yes, but when I've finished that and your COSMOgirl! is the only thing that's lying around, what choice do I have?'

'Mo-om!' Frida cried. You could tell she was really upset that Stark had been so short-sighted as to schedule their grand opening on the last warm weekend in September, which all of her fellow Walking Dead members were being 'forced' to spend at their families' vacation homes in the Hamptons. They'd invited Frida along of course.

But she'd as soon eat glass as miss an opportunity to meet actual celebrities - even ones who don't live in a penthouse.

'Em's going to ruin everything. Can't you see that? She's a dork, you know, Mom. Not even a geek, which would be semi-respectable, but a dork. All she ever does is play her stupid computer games with Christopher, study, and watch disgusting surgery shows on the Discovery Health Channel. And she's going to say something mean to Gabriel, and embarrass me.'

'I wil not!' I protested, with my mouth full of microwave waffle.

'Yes you wil,' Frida said. 'You're always mean to guys.'
'That is completely false,' I said. 'Name one time I was mean to Christopher.'

'Christopher Maloney is your boyfriend,' Frida said, rolling her eyes. 'And I mean a cute guy.'

This was such a libelous statement - since no way is Christopher Maloney my boyfriend -

that I nearly choked on my waffle. Not that I haven't sometimes wished Christopher were my

boyfriend, and not just my boy friend - or my best friend, actually.

But Christopher has never once expressed any sort of similar desire. You know, that we

should take our friendship to a more-than-platonic level. In fact, I'm not sure Christopher has

ever even realized that I'm not a boy. I'm not actually the most feminine girl in the world. I

honestly wouldn't mind trying to be, but the two or three times I've experimented by putting on

eyeliner or whatever, Frida has just burst into hysterical laughter and told me to 'Take it off!

Just take it off right now!' before I've even gotten out of the apartment.

So I've taken it off.

I guess it's unusual that my best friend is a boy. But the truth is, I haven't had a girl friend

since fifth grade. The few occasions girls ever actually invited me over in middle school, it was

always so . . . awkward. Because we ended up having nothing in common. Like, I always
wanted to play video games, and they always wanted to play Truth or Dare (with an emphasis on the Truth part . . . like, 'Is it true that you have a crush on that Christopher guy, but that you just tell everyone you're really only friends, and that even he doesn't know you secretly love him? Do you want us to tell him how you really feel for you? Because we'll be happy to.').

Yeah. Like that.

It just didn't work for me. I told my mother I'd rather stay home and read.

Which is one of the good things about having parents who are academics. They know how you feel. Because the truth is, they'd always rather stay home and read too.

Christopher was different, though. From the day almost eight years ago that I saw him hanging out with the moving van that was delivering all his stuff to our building, I knew we were going to get along.

And OK, mostly because I peeked into the box marked Chris's Video Games as it sat next to the freight elevator, and saw that we liked all the same role-playing games.

But whatever.

I guess because we hang out so much, people think we're dating, but nothing could be further from the truth (alas).
Still, even though we're not dating - however much I might wish that we were - I resented Frida's implication that Christopher isn't cute. He isn't, under the standard Walking Dead definition of hottie, of course. I mean, he's over six-feet tall and does have the requisite blond hair and blue eyes the WD so favour. Except that Christopher has been trying to see how long he can grow his hair before he drives his father, the Commander (he teaches political science), completely insane. It's almost past his shoulders now.

And he doesn't spend four hours a day lifting weights, so he isn't a muscle-bound freak like Whitney's boyfriend, Jason Klein.

But just because Christopher isn't what the WDs consider hot doesn't mean he isn't cute.

'Thanks,' I snarled at Frida. 'A lot. See if Christopher ever comes over to defragment your computer again.'

'Christopher's hair is longer than mine,' Frida hissed. 'And what about yesterday in the cafeteria, when you screamed at Jason Klein to shut up while you were both in line for ketchup for your burgers at the condiment bar?'

'Wel,' I said with an uncomfortable shrug, 'yesterday was a bad day And besides, he
deserved it. And at least Christopher can cut his hair. What's your excuse?'

'Al Jason said was that he preferred the cheerleaders' spring halter-top uniforms to their winter sweater ones!' Frida cried.

'Well, that is sexist, Frida,' Mom said.

I flashed Frida a triumphant look over my waffles. Still she wouldn't let it go.

'Cheerleaders are athletes, Mom,' Frida insisted. 'Their halter-top uniforms are less binding than their sweater ones, allowing them more freedom of movement.'

'Oh my God.' I stared across the breakfast table at my little sister. 'You're trying out for cheerleading this year, aren't you?'

Frida took a deep breath. 'Forget it. Just forget it. I'll ask Dad. Dad'll let me go by myself.'

'No he won't,' Mom said. 'And you will not disturb him. You know he got in late last night.'

Dad lives in New Haven during the week, where he teaches at Yale, and only comes home to Manhattan on weekends (it's tough on married academics when they can't get hired by the same college).

Because of the guilt he feels about this, Dad will generally let us do anything we want. If Frida had asked if it would be OK if she went to Atlantic City with the men's
swim team for

the weekend to gamble away her college-education money, Dad would have been
like, 'Sure,

why not? Here's my bank card, have a blast.'

Which is why Mom watches us like a hawk when Dad's home. She knows
perfectly well

that he's a pushover when it comes to his teenaged daughters.

'And what's this about you trying out for cheerleading?' Mom wanted to know.
'Frida, we

need to talk . . . '

While Mom went on about how women weren't allowed to play men's sports in
school

until the 1970s, and so were relegated to cheer for the male athletes on the
sidelines, thus

giving birth to cheerleading, Frida sent me a withering look that said, I'll get you
for this, Em!

I had no doubt she'd get her revenge later, at the Stark Megastore opening.

And it turned out I wasn't wrong.

It just didn't happen quite the way I'd been expecting it to.

Airhead
Three

Frida turned out to be right about one thing: Gabriel Luna is a great singer-songwriter.

And - truth be told - he was pretty cute too. He wasn't one of those music-company-

fabricated pretty boys . . . the ones Frida and her friends are always freaking out
over on TRL

or whatever.

Nor did he seem to be harbouring any strategicaly placed, look-at-me-I'm-so-

indie
tattoos, or the latest popular trend amongst male singers, eyeliner. Gabriel, as far
as I could tel

(which wasn't easy, since there was quite a crowd between us and the stage on
which he was

performing), appeared to be tattoo and make-up free.

He was even dressed sort of normaly, in a button-down shirt and jeans. His hair
was

choppily cut and a little too long (though not compared to Christopher's), and
very dark in

contrast to his somewhat piercing blue eyes (not, you know, that I noticed), but it
stil looked

good. His hair, I mean.

But it was his voice - oh God, and that English accent - that got to me. Deep and
rich and

soulful - but also playful when the song caled for it - his voice filed the
Broadway Tunes and

Soundtracks section of SoHo Stark Megastore, where the mini-stage had been set up for him
to perform. People who were in the aisles looking for discount CDs couldn't help but pause

with their Stark shopping baskets to listen, because Gabriel's voice was so compelling and his

presence so commanding.

He came out on stage with a fast dance number - the first single from his new album. And

it was, I have to admit, pretty catchy. I found myself kind of bouncing along to it.

But, you know, secretly, so Christopher wouldn't notice, since I knew he'd make some
cynical comment.

Then Gabriel traded in the electric guitar he'd been using to accompany himself for a

regular one, and went acoustic for his second number, which he performed sitting on a stool.

And OK, I'll admit, Frida wasn't the only one who might have swooned a little. I had a

hard time reminding myself that I'm not a teeny-bopper any more . . . even though I might have

been attending an actual teeny-bopperfest.

At least until it came time to get in line to get Frida's CD signed. That's when reality came
crashing back, as we found ourselves surrounded by a mob of thirteen- and fourteen-year-old girls, all wearing sparkly low-rise jeans exactly like Frida's, and all clutching slips of paper on which they'd written the name to whom they wanted Gabriel to personalize their CD . . . along with their cellphone number. Just in case Gabriel happened to ask for it.

What had been a magical few moments turned tedious. And fast.

'He's not looking at you,' I assured Frida as we stood in the long (did I mention it was long?) line to get Gabriel's autograph.

'Yes he is,' Frida insisted as she waved. 'He's looking right at me!'

'No,' Christopher said, standing beside us. Good friend that he is, Christopher had come along to lend me moral support . . . and also to check out Stark's electronics section, which was featuring a newly released, Stark-designed hand-held gaming device with a screen wide enough that you could actually play tactic-style games on it without going blind. Even better, they were selling them for under a hundred bucks.

Christopher and I are ethically opposed to Stark Megastores . . . but we're not above taking advantage of their heavily slashed discount prices.

'He's looking at her.' Christopher pointed towards a plasma screen that was hanging from
the ceiling above our heads, showing Nikki Howard - looking coolly beautiful in a filmy evening gown and ridiculously high stilettos - against a hot-pink background, gyrating in time to the thumping rock music that filed the store.

There were dozens - maybe hundreds - of similar plasma screens suspended by thick wires from the open duct work along the ceiling all over the store, each featuring Nikki Howard in various states of undress, urging patrons to try Stark Enterprises' new line of clothing and beauty products, which would be available exclusively in Stark Megastores worldwide in the new year.

'He's probably trying to see if she's got anything on under there,' Christopher joked.

'Gabriel doesn't think of women as sex objects,' Frida sniffed with the merest flick of a glance in the direction Christopher was pointing. 'I know. I read it in his interview with COSMOgirl! He respects women with brains.'

I nearly choked on my free Stark Cola at the suggestion that Nikki Howard had a brain.

Frida got defensive right away. 'She does!' she insisted. 'What other seventeen-year-old do you know who's gotten as many modeling and product-endorsement contracts
as Nikki

has? And she started with nothing - nothing. Seriously, how could you not know
that? Don't

you people do anything but play that stupid video game?'

Fortunately it wasn't all that easy to hear Frida going on about how out of touch

Christopher and I were with our own generation, considering the rock music that

was blasting

all around us (except that it was all right, since it was Gabriel's music) . . . not to

mention the

hordes of people crowding the store.

Not all of them were there to meet Gabriel Luna, like we were, though. A lot of

them, in

fact, were there for an entirely different reason: to make trouble. Every few

minutes we saw a

uniformed security officer dragging another protester from the store. The rabble

rousers were

pretty easily distinguished from actual customers, like Frida, by their combat

fatigues . . . and

the paintbal guns they all seemed to be carrying beneath their trench coats. Their

primary

targets were the plasma screens, many of which had already been hit (in strategic

locations) by

giant blobs of yellow paint.

In other words, the place was a zoo. Which meant that Frida was in her element.

My little

sister was taking in all the excitement like it was pure oxygen, franticaly text-
messaging her
friends, letting them know what they were missing, and taking snaps with her camera phone.

'Besides, you guys,' Frida was saying as she pointed her phone in Gabriel's direction -

even though we were still so far away he was only going to appear as a white-shirted blob to

whoever she was sending the photo, 'Gabriel's deeply spiritual . . . and intelectual. Just like I

am.'

I choked on another free sample of Stark Cola.

'I am!' Frida insisted. 'Just because I'm not a math and science dork like some people . . .

Besides, Gabriel says what matters is the size of a woman's heart, not her bra.'

'Right,' I said sarcastically. 'I'm sure Gabriel'd rather be with a total dog than Nikki

Howard.'

Christopher got a good laugh out of that one - even though as I said it I was sort of hoping

it was true. But Frida didn't find it funny at all.

'I'm not a total dog,' Frida said, shooting me an injured look.

'Frida.' I stared at her with my mouth open. 'I didn't mean you.'

But it was too late. I'd hurt her feelings.

'Maybe you think of yourself that way,' Frida said stiffly. 'But don't drag me down to your
level, Em. At least I make an effort.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' I demanded.

'Wel, look at you,' she said.

I looked at myself.

And, OK, I'm not the fashion plate Nikki Howard might be, in her stilettos and bikini and spray-on tan, or Whitney Robertson, with her flirty skirts and sexy camis.

But what's wrong with jeans, a hoody and Converse?

Frida was only too eager to tel me.

'You look like a guy,' she complained. 'I mean, maybe you have a figure, but it's not like anybody could ever tel thanks to how baggy you wear your clothes. And have you ever even tried to do anything with your hair except throw it back in a scrunchy, which, Page 15 Meg Cabot: Airhead by the way, are completely 2002? At least I try to look nice.'

I could feel myself turning bright red under the less-than-flattering Stark Megastore lighting.

It's one thing to be dissed by your little sister. But it's another thing entirely to be dissed by her in front of the guy you've been secretly crushing on since the seventh grade.

'Gosh, I'm sorry,' I said, stung. Really, did I need this? I didn't even want to be in this stupid store, in this stupid line, to meet this guy who, OK, was cute, but who I'd practicaly
never heard of before this morning. I could have been having a perfectly nice time at home,

trying to reach level sixty of Journeyquest with Christopher. The last thing I needed on one of

my rare days off from that helhole otherwise known as Tribeca Alternative was this. 'I didn't

know I was supposed to conform to some random standard of beauty dictated by some

tween-queen fashion model.'

This caused Christopher to snort with laughter.

'Tween queen. Good one,' he said. I felt my blush turn into a flush. Of pleasure. Because

Christopher had appreciated something I'd said.

Yeah. I'm that far gone. It's sad really.

'Anyway' Christopher went on, 'I think Em looks fine . . . '

Fine! Christopher thought I looked fine! My heart soared. I mean, I know fine wasn't

exactly the world's greatest compliment, but coming from Christopher it was like being hailed

earth-shatteringly gorgeous. I was pretty sure I'd died and gone to heaven.

' . . . and at least she's not some big plastic phony like her,' he added, nodding at the

screen above our heads.

'Yeah,' I said, throwing Frida a triumphant look. Fine! Christopher said I looked fine!
But Frida was barely even paying attention.

'For your information,' she snapped, 'Nikki Howard has taken the beauty and fashion industry by storm. She's one of the youngest models ever to have done so. Nikki and her friends-

'Oh, here we go.' I rolled my eyes. 'A lecture on the FONs.'

'What's an FON?' Christopher wanted to know.

'Friend of Nikki's,' I translated. 'According to last month's COSMOgirl! she runs with a whole posse of FFBFs.'

'Wait . . . what's an FFBF?' Christopher looked even more confused. If it didn't have to do with a computer or computer game, Christopher often didn't know what it was. This was what set him so adorably apart from every other guy at TAHS.

'You know. People who are in the media all the time, but they're only Famous For Being Famous,' I explained to him. 'They've never done anything to get famous - because they don't have any talent? They're usually rich people's kids, like Nikki's on-again-off-again boyfriend, Brandon Stark.' I was in a good mood, on account of the fine remark, so I lowered my voice to sound like a television news announcer: 'Nineteen-year-old son of billionaire Stark
Enterprises owner Robert Stark. Or celebutantes, like Tim Colins's seventeen-year-old daughter, Lulu. The Tim Colins,' I went on. 'Who directed the Journeyquest movie.'

Christopher's jaw dropped. 'And completely ruined it?'

'That'd be the one,' I said. 'Lulu's an FON.'

'Why do you guys have to be so mean?' Frida whined. 'It's like everything fun you look down on.'

'That's not true,' Christopher said, crumpling an empty Stark Cookie bag, the contents of which he'd scarfed earlier, and stuffing it into the pocket of his copious jeans. Christopher had zeroed in on the bags of cookies Stark was giving away for free, and seized as many as his pockets could hold for us to snack on later. The Commander doesn't alow junk food in the house. 'We don't look down on Journeyquest. Wel, the game. The movie freaking sucked.'

'Besides that stupid computer game,' Frida said, scowling.

'Music,' I said, noting that Gabriel's voice was stil booming over the speakers above us. 'I like music.' Wel . . . this music, to be exact.

'Oh, right,' Frida said. 'Name one popular musician you listen to. And don't name any of that horrible metal crap Christopher likes, either.'
'One popular musician?' I raised an eyebrow. 'Fine. How about . . . Tchaikovsky?'

'Nice one,' Christopher said with a burst of laughter and an approving nod. 'Mahler. He's good too.'

'Too dour,' I said. 'Beethoven.'

'That dude is rad,' Christopher said, raising his fists - thumbs and pinkies upright - in a rocker's salute to Beethoven. 'Beethoven rules my world!'

'Oh God,' Frida moaned, dropping her head into her hands in mortification.

'Come on, Free,' I said, elbowing her chummily. 'We aren't that embarrassing, are we?'

'Yes,' she murmured. 'You are. You really are. Don't you realize that you guys look down on everything normal people like? Like Nikki Howard and her friends -'

It was kind of funny that as Frida said this, Nikki Howard herself actually materialized -

along with some of her friends - before us.

Except that Frida didn't notice right away. I mean, that Nikki Howard was standing in front of her. Wel, practicaly.

That's because Frida was too busy defending her idol tome.

'You're always going on about feminism, Em,' Frida went on. 'Wel, do you really think

Nikki would have gotten where she is today - the Face of Stark, one of the
highest-earning
models right now - if she weren't a feminist?'

'Uh,' I said. Because I couldn't believe the person we were arguing about was walking past us.

'And I don't see how you can even call yourself a feminist, Em,' Frida went on, oblivious,

'when you are so totally mean about a member of your own sex. I mean, Nikki's just a girl, like you are.'

Except that I could see with my own eyes that Nikki was very far from being just a girl -

let alone a girl like I am. For one thing, she was about a foot taller (thanks to a pair of five-inch heels, but even without them, she had to have been about five foot ten), and Page 17 Meg Cabot: Airhead about half as wide as me. Seriously. Two of her would have fitted into my jeans.

And for another, her shiny blonde hair flowed smoothly down past her elbows, not a strand out of place, even though she was practically running - despite her heels - across the store. Strangely, her filmy dress seemed to cover everything it was supposed to too . . .

despite the fact that it was the lowest-cut thing I'd ever seen - aside from what
Whitney Robertson wore to school last year on Picture Day. How did Nikki keep those thin straps of material over her nipples, anyway? Double-sided tape? I'd heard about that kind of thing of course, but never had a chance to observe its use in real life.

And it was a good thing too (that Nikki had thought to use tape to hold in her breasts, which weren't huge enough to need their own zip codes or anything, but - unlike my own -

definitely stood to attention when called to duty).

Because she was carrying a tiny bal of fluff that appeared, at first glance, to be a pompom and, at second glance, to be a smal dog, trying franticaly to burrow its head between her boobs and get away from al the crazy lights and sounds in the store. If it hadn't been for the tape keeping him out, wel, that dog would have dived right inside Nikki's dress.

Frida was stil going on about what a bad example of feminism I am (about which, can I just say, Helo, Pot? This is Kettle. Yeah, you're black), completely oblivious to what was going on behind her - even though everybody else in line was staring, slack-jawed, at the rapidly approaching supermodel and her entourage of dog, some kind of agent or publicist
(red-haired lady with a briefcase jabbering into a headset), hairdresser (man in a silk shirt and leather trousers, carrying a can of hairspray) and the Number One FON herself, Lulu Colins, an equally skinny, equally pretty seventeen-year-old girl in a faux snakeskin-print wrap-dress, who couldn't seem to stop looking at her Sidekick, even to watch where she was going.

I swear, it was just like at school when Whitney and Lindsey and the rest of the Walking Dead start their morning promenade from the front of the building to their lockers. Every single person in the vicinity just stopped talking and stared as if transfixed.

And not just the people al around us either. I noticed that Nikki had caught Gabriel Luna's attention as wel. He was stil smiling at the girls clustered in front of him thrusting CDs (and their phone numbers) at him.

But he was also keeping a pretty close eye on Nikki . . .

. . . as, I might add, was Christopher.

It was at that moment that Frida finaly turned round to see what Christopher - his mouth slightly agape - and I were staring at.

And completely lost it.

'Ohmigodohmigodohmigod,' Frida cried, waving her free hand (the other was stil clutching
her cel) in front of her face as if she were fanning tears from her eyes. 'Ohmigod, it's her. It's her. It's HER!' 
'I don't know what you're talking about, Free,' Christopher said. 'That Gabriel guy maybe sensitive and all that. But he is totally staring at her chest.' 
'Um, he wouldn't be the only one doing that,' I muttered, noting - with dissatisfaction - the direction of Christopher's gaze. 
He realized what I meant and began to turn bright red. But I noticed he didn't look away. 
Funny how, all of a sudden, I wasn't feeling so fine any more. 
'Ohmigod, you guys,' Frida said, clutching my arm. 'Lulu Colins is with her! I have to get their autographs. I have to!' 
But at that very moment, the line in which Page 18 Meg Cabot: Airhead we'd been standing for the past hour reached the very table that, mere minutes before, had seemed so very far away and out of reach. Gabriel Luna himself was within autographing distance. Heck, he was within TOUCHING distance. 
Not that, you know, I was going to reach out and grab a big hunk of his shirt, or anything. 
I'm just saying I could have. If I'd wanted to.
Up close, he looked even better than on stage. Up close, I could tell he definitely didn't
have any tattoos. Nor was he wearing eyeliner. His eyes really were that blue. And his gaze
really was that piercing.
Except that it wasn't looking anywhere near mine. It was, in fact, still glued to Nikki.
'Frida.' I found myself as unable to tear my gaze from Gabriel Luna as he was apparently
unable to tear his own away from Nikki Howard. 'Uh. Frida?'
Except that when my sister didn't reply, and when I finally forced myself to look in her
direction, I saw that Frida had actually stepped from the line and was heading towards Nikki
and her entourage - not like she meant to be doing it, but like she simply couldn't resist the pull
of Nikki's celebrity . . . kind of like how Leander was drawn into the Dark Castle by the beam
of the Ring of Ashanti in the Journeyquest movie (which sucked).
'Frida?' I called after her. Then, realizing that Gabriel Luna had finally stopped staring at
Nikki and was instead looking curiously at me, I turned towards him slowly and heard myself
murmur, 'Um. Hi.'
'Hi,' Gabriel said back. And then he smiled.
And - I'm not kidding - it was like reaching level sixty in Journeyquest. No, it
was even

better than that . . . it was like waking up in the morning and hearing your
mother go, 'Guess

what? They just canceled school. It's a Snow Day' Seriously, that's what his
smile did to me -

gave me a jolt of pleasure that was almost physical, it was so strong.

Which is weird, because I'd felt something very similar just minutes before when
Christopher had caled me fine. Boys are confusing.

Of course I couldn't say anything. Of course I could only stand there gazing at
him with my

mouth hanging open, wondering how anyone so beautiful could be real, and not
a product of

airbrushing or computer animation.

'What's your name then?' Gabriel asked in his gorgeous English accent.

'Um.' Oh God. He was talking to me. He was talking to me. What should I say?
Why was

this happening? Where was Frida? Where the frack was FRIDA? 'Em.'

'Em?' Gabriel smiled some more. 'Short for Emily?'

'Um,' I said. Oh God. What was wrong with me? Normaly I had no problem
talking to

cute boys. Because normaly, al the cute boys I met - Christopher excepted of
course - were

sexist creeps who needed to be taken down a peg or two. They weren't sweet
British hotties

with a voice like an angel and blue eyes that seemed to pierce my soul. 'No . . . '
'Do you have a CD you'd like for me to sign?' Gabriel wanted to know, looking questioningly at my empty hands.

Oh no.

'Hold on,' I said, my heart pounding. 'My sister -'

I spun round to find Frida and ran smack Page 19 Meg Cabot: Airhead into Christopher,

who was stil staring at Nikki. Only now he wore a look of concern. 'Uh, Em,' he said. 'Look -

What happened next seemed to unfold as if it was in a dream. Or more accurately, a

nightmare. I saw my sister walking towards Nikki Howard and her posse.

At the same time, I saw a guy standing nearby suddenly throw open his trench coat to

reveal an ELF T-shirt . . . along with a paintgun. A Megastore security guy in an earpiece,

seeing this at the same time I did, grabbed Nikki by the wrist and jerked her back. Meanwhile,

Paintgun Guy, grinning balefully, raised his rifle and fired at the plasma TV hanging directly

over Nikki's head, leaving an enormous yelow splotch across the screen where Nikki's boobs

had been. Actualy, it looked like she'd been eating a hot dog with mustard that had slid out on

to her chest . . . something that happens to me not infrequently.
Only this time, the plasma screen came loose from the wires suspending it from the ceiling.

First one wire popped. Then a second one.

And standing directly beneath it stood my sister Frida, stil holding her pen towards Nikki

for an autograph.

'Frida! Move!' I yeled, my heart giving a lurch.

I darted forward to push her out of the way just as the last wire holding the giant television

in place broke with a pinging sound that was easily audible, even over the music blasting from

the Stark Megastore's speakers.

And then the whole thing came crashing down.

On me.

And - just like in Journeyquest, when I make a mistake and my character loses a life -

everything went black.

**Airhead**
Four

Images. That's what I became aware of next.

Like the kind you see floating on the back of your eyelids if you press the heels of your hands against them when you have a headache. Just shapes realy, floating in space.

I watched them, wondering what they were. They looked like amoebas . . . no, like

Christopher's hair, underwater in the swimming pool, when they made us do laps in PE last time, and I was spying on him with my goggles . . .

Wait a minute. What was I doing in PE? Had I falen underwater? But I wasn't wet. At least, I was pretty sure I wasn't . . . I didn't feel wet. Did I?

How could I be seeing Christopher's hair underwater if I wasn't wet? Maybe my eyes weren't open. Were my eyes closed or open? Why couldn't I lift up my hand to feel my face and see? My hand felt so heavy . . . I couldn't even lift it . . .

Why was I so tired?

So tired . . .

I heard voices. The voices were saying things. What were they saying? I couldn't tel. I couldn't understand them. I was too tired to understand them. Who kept talking?
Why

wouldn't they let me sleep?

Wait. That was Mom's voice. Mom was the one who was doing all that talking. Mom and

... who else? Dad. That was Dad. Mom and Dad were talking. They were saying things.

They wanted me to wake up. Why? Why couldn't I just go on sleeping?

I knew I should listen to them - whenever Mom tells us to do something, Frida and I

always do it. Eventually anyway.

But I felt like I couldn't move. Like I'd been turned to stone. I just wanted to go on

sleeping forever.

Still, I could hear Mom, her voice charged with urgency.

'Em! Em, if you can hear me, open your eyes! Open your eyes, Em. Just open your eyes

for a minute, Em.'

I knew that old trick. The second she knew I was awake, Mom would make me get up

and empty the dishwasher or go to school or something equally hideous. I wasn't falling for that

one.

'Em! Please! Please, just open your eyes.'

She sounded pretty upset, though. Maybe the apartment was on fire. Maybe I should do
what she said. Just open my eyes for a second to see what she wanted.

'Please, Em . . .'

She sounded like she was crying actualy. I didn't want to make my mom cry. That's the

last thing I wanted to do.

So I tried to open my eyes. I realy did. I wanted to.

But they just . . . wouldn't open.

My eyes wouldn't open.

I heard my mother crying, and I heard my dad comforting her, murmuring, 'It's al right,

Karen.'

'In cases like this,' I heard another, unfamiliar man's voice saying, 'it's not unusual for -'

I didn't hear the rest of what the man was saying because I was too busy concentrating on

trying to make my eyes open. Only I couldn't get my eyelids to lift. I realy couldn't. It was like

they were made of lead, and I was just too weak to raise them.

So then I tried to open my mouth to tel my mom not to cry, that I was fine, just so tired.

Maybe if they let me rest a little more . . .

But I found I couldn't open my mouth either.

That was a little scary. For a minute. But the truth was, I was realy just so tired . . .
so much easier to go back to sleep. I'd tel Mom later, I decided . . . about my being too tired
to do what she asked. I'd explain it al later, when I wasn't so sleepy. I needed to get my energy back. I'd be fine with a few more hours of sleep.

Finaly I managed to open my eyes. Not because anyone was caling my name. Not because I was seeing amoebas behind my eyelids. My eyes just . . . opened. Al by themselves.

But when they did, and I looked around, I Page 21 Meg Cabot: Airhead was surprised to find I wasn't in a swimming pool, or even at home, but in a bed in a hospital room.

I could tel that I was in a bed in a hospital room, because even though it was pretty dark - it had to be night-time - nothing looked familiar to me. The wals were beige, not the Navajo White I'd painted my wals back home in a fit one day, because I couldn't stand the bland eggshel the rest of the wals in our apartment were.

And al my posters - from the Journeyquest movie, which I know had sucked, but the posters were cool - were gone. So were al my postcards from that field trip we took to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Instead, al I could see were wires. Wires that appeared to be
coming out of me. They were hooked up to machines beside the bed I was in, which were
whirring softly and occasionally making pinging noises.

Fortunately I didn't get scared or anything, because sitting in a chair next to the machines
was my dad. He was sleeping.

I tried to think why I would be in a hospital with wires coming out of me. I am actually a
very healthy person and have only been to the hospital once, when I broke my arm falling off
the see-saw in our apartment building's playground in the second grade. Had I fallen off
something again? I couldn't remember climbing on anything. How had I ended up in the
hospital? I didn't feel hurt.

Just super-duper tired.

But I felt better than my dad looked. He had a lot of grey stubble all over his face, like he
hadn't shaved in a long, long time (which seemed kind of funny to me, since when I'd seen him
just last night at dinner, he hadn't had a beard. Or had he? Looking back, I couldn't seem to
remember . . . hadn't I had dinner with my dad last night? It seemed so long ago . . .) . Also,

his shirt was super wrinkly and there were some stains on it.

The truth was, my dad looked pretty awful. I wondered why my dad would look
like that.

I didn't want to wake him up to ask though. That seemed like it would be a selfish thing to do.

On the other hand . . . I was so thirsty. Seriously. I thought I was going to die of thirst.

But there didn't appear to be anyone else around. And it looked as if, whatever was wrong with me, it was kind of serious, given al the tubes and wires.

If I could just get a sip of water I'd go right back to sleep, no questions asked . . .

I opened my mouth and tried to say Dad's name. At first nothing happened. That's right. I tried to say the word Dad and no sound at al came out of my mouth. I had to try a couple more times before I was able to make any kind of noise and, even then, it was more of a grunt than anything else.

'Dad?'

Only the word sounded realy strange. I don't know why. Maybe my voice was rusty from lack of use or something. Or thirst.

But my dad's head jerked up anyway, and he stared at me al bug-eyed. 'Er . . . Em?' he asked hesitantly.

'H-hey,' I said. 'S-sorry -'

Except that came out sounding weird too. What was wrong with my voice?
Dad seemed to think my voice sounded weird too, since, his eyes stil wide, he jumped up from his chair, yeling, 'Doctor! Doctor!' and then rushed off. Which indicated to me that I must be more hurt than I'd originaaly thought. But I was too tired to wait around to find out how hurt. Seriously, I felt even more tired than I usualy feel in first-period Public Speaking. Which is pretty tired. Probably if I didn't stay up al night playing Journeyquest with Christopher - then have to stay up the rest of the night finishing my homework - I'd be able to get up in the morning, but . . . I wanted to stay awake. I realy did. I wanted to find out what was wrong with me, and why I was in the hospital. I wanted to get some water . . . But I just couldn't keep my eyes open a minute longer. I closed them, thinking I'd just take a little nap until Dad got back. But of course I went back to sleep. Mmmm, sleep. Delicious sleep. I hoped I wouldn't start drooling after I dropped off. But I figured in a hospital they must be totaly used to that. When I opened my eyes again it was daytime. And my mom was sitting in the chair my dad had jumped out of. She was caling my name. 'Mom,' I said groggily Because the truth was, I was stil pretty tired. 'I don't want
to go to

school today. OK?`

At least that's what I tried to say. I'm not positive those are the words that my

mother

heard, because they didn't sound much like what came out of my mouth.

Instead of arguing with me though, Mom flattened her hand across her mouth

and started

to cry. That's when I noticed she wasn't the only person in the room besides me.

Behind her

stood my dad and a couple of people in white coats I'd never seen before.

I figured the reason she was crying was because my voice stil sounded so weird. It was

kind of . . . I don't know . . . high-pitched.

Also, I stil wasn't sure the words I'd said made sense.

'Honey,' Dad said. He had his hands on Mom's shoulders and was looking at me

funny . . .

like the time I slipped and hit my chin on the side of the pool at the hotel we

were staying at in

DisneyWorld, and I didn't know it but a big chunk of my skin had come off and I

was bleeding

copiously, but since it didn't hurt I wasn't crying or anything, nor did I notice I

was covered in

my own blood because I was wet anyway. 'Do you, um, know who we are?'

Whoa. Whatever number I'd done to get myself into the hospital, it must have been
serious.

'Um, yeah,' I said. 'You're Daniel Watts and she's Karen Rosenthal-Watts.'

The words didn't really come out sounding that clear. There seemed to be something wrong with my enunciation.

Maybe that's why my mom burst into loud sobs. Which was really startling. I've never seen her cry that way before. Not even at the end of the movie Love Actually, which always makes her weep like a baby.

I'm pretty sure Dad had never heard her cry like that before either. He looked totally startled by her outburst, and kept going, 'Karen, it's OK.'

Fortunately one of the people wearing a white coat stepped around my parents while they were huddled in their weepy hug and said, in a kind voice, 'I'm Doctor Holcombe, Emerson.'

'Oh,' I said. Then I tried to clear my throat. Only it didn't work, because there was nothing in my throat to clear, apparently. 'Why does my voice sound so weird?' I asked.

Dr Holcombe had taken out a penlight and Page 23 Meg Cabot: Airhead was flashing it into my eyes. 'Are you in any pain?' he wanted to know. I wasn't sure if he was ignoring my question or if he just hadn't understood me. My voice sounded so weird, I couldn't quite
understand myself.

Meanwhile, another person in a white coat, this one a lady with her dark hair in a bun,
said, 'I'm Doctor Higgins. Can you wiggle your toes for me, Emerson?'

It was hard - I was still so tired - but I wiggled my toes.

'What happened to me?' I wanted to know.

'Can you follow the end of my finger with your eyes, Emerson?' Dr Holcombe wanted to
know. 'Don't move your head. Just follow it with your eyes.'

So I followed his finger with my eyes. I could see everything just fine now. No more
amoebas everywhere.

'I mean, I know I'm in the hospital,' I went on. 'But what's with all these wires? And why
does my voice sound like that?'

'Just keep looking here,' Dr Holcombe said as he continued to shine the light in
my eyes as
I was following his finger with my gaze.

'Can you squeeze my hand, Emerson?' Dr Higgins wanted to know.

I squeezed her hand.

'Seriously,' I said. Since Mom was still crying and Dad was still trying to help her pull
herself together, I had no choice but to address my concerns to these doctors I had only just
met. 'How much school have I missed?' Because I was in all Advanced Placement classes,

and it was no joke if you fell behind. And then, because I still sounded so weird to myself, I

asked, 'What is wrong with my voice?'

'We'll get to all that,' Dr Holcombe said, finally flicking off his flashlight, 'in time, Emerson.'

'Em,' I corrected him. 'I go by Em.'

'Of course.' Dr Holcombe smiled, and put his penlight away. 'Now why don't you try to

get some more rest? Your family, as you can see, is fine - ' he glanced at them, realized they

were both still sniffing, and looked uncomfortably away again - 'er, at least, they will be.

They've been very worried about you, that's all. It's quite a relief to see that you're doing so

well. You can go back to sleep now, if you want to.'

I was still pretty sleepy. But I was worried about the school thing. His assurance that we'd

got to all that in time didn't mean I wasn't going to have bucketloads of work to make up.

And how come no one would answer my question about my voice?

But the doctor with her hair in a bun was jiggling some of my wires, and suddenly I got

sleepier than ever. So I closed my eyes for another little nap.

And when I opened them again, it was night-time, and the handsomest guy I'd
ever seen in

my life was sitting in the chair beside my bed.

Airhead
Five

'Oh, you're awake then,' the guy said when he noticed that I was staring at him.

And then he smiled.

And I knew exactly what it must feel like to reach level sixty at Journeyquest. Suddenly, it

was a little hard to breathe.

Also, it wasn't at ALL annoying that one of the machines next to my bed started pinging

like MAD in time with my heartbeat.

'Ooh no,' the guy said, the smile disappearing as he glanced at the machine in alarm. 'Did I

do something?'

'No,' I assured him in my stil-weird voice. But who even cared?

Obviously this guy was a hallucination.

But one that I was going to enjoy as long as I could.

I smiled back at him, and asked, relieved the pinging had gone back to normal (how

embarrassing!), 'Are those for me?'

Because he was holding a big bouquet of red roses. Like his presence wasn't enough of a

treat. He'd brought me flowers as well.

'Ooh,' he said, looking down at the roses like he'd only just remembered they were there.
He laid them down on the bed beside me. 'Yes, they are. Do you remember me? Gabriel Luna? From the Stark Megastore grand opening last month?'

I had no idea what he was talking about. I guess I semi-remembered something about a Stark Megastore. I definitely remembered him though. Or at least, I thought I did. That dark hair and those piercing blue eyes - those I knew.

Just not the name that had been attached to them. Or how I knew them.

I couldn't believe such a totally hot guy was visiting me in the hospital. And I really couldn't believe he had brought me flowers.

'Of course I remember you,' I lied.

'That's good to know,' Gabriel said, smiling again. And this time, even though my heart didn't speed up (thank God), I felt it melt. Just a little. Because of course even though he was handsome, he wasn't Christopher. 'I wasn't certain you would. Couldn't have been the best day of your life . . .'

What was he talking about? I had no idea.

'Ha ha,' I said, smiling back at him. I reached over to touch one of the rose's silky crimson petals.

Which is when I noticed my hand . . .
... wasn't my hand.

I mean, it was, obviously. It was attached to my arm. But it looked... different. Instead

of my chewed-up, raggedy fingernails (I'm a hardcore nail-biter), I saw that I had what

appeared to be a grown out, though perfect-except-where-the-cuticles-needed-to-be-
pushed-back, French manicure... pink on the bottom, with white tips.

Weird. Also, did my fingers look... thinner than before? Could you lose weight in your

hand? I suppose so, if you were unconscious long enough.

But stil. How long had I been sleeping, anyway?

Then I realized: long enough for Frida to glue on those Lee Press On Nails she was always

threatening to make me wear.

Then I realized Gabriel was talking to me. He was saying, 'You look well. They're saying -

well, all sorts of things about you. I didn't know what to expect. No one would tell me anything

about you. They aren't allowing visitors... I had to sneak on to this floor -'

He snuck on to my floor to visit me? That was so sweet...

'How are you feeling?' he asked, actually sounding concerned.

'Fine,' I replied. 'A little sleepy...'

'Then you rest,' Gabriel said, looking slightly alarmed. 'I didn't mean to wake you.'
'No, it's OK,' I said, fearful he was preparing to leave. My hot-guy hallucination! It couldn't end so soon!

But the truth was, I was having a hard time keeping my eyelids up. They kept kind of falling closed, no matter how hard I tried to keep them open, just like in Mr Greer's class.

'Don't go,' I said to him. It was just an inch or two from the rose petal I was stroking to where he was resting his hand. And before I could stop myself, I had lain my fingers over his.

What was I doing? I mean, me, touch a boy's hand? Especially the hand of a boy as cute as Gabriel Luna. Not that any boy as cute as he was had ever come close enough to me before in order for me to reach his hand . . . I mean, obviously there was Christopher, who I considered cute . . .

. . . but I knew the rest of the world - or at least Frida and the rest of the Walking Dead -

didn't technically agree with me. At least, not unless he got a haircut.

Then again, Christopher had never brought me ROSES before. Christopher hadn't come to visit me in the hospital (don't think I hadn't noticed). Christopher had never stroked the back of my hand with his thumb, as Gabriel had just done. The few times I'd
ever touched

Christopher's hand with mine, he'd moved his out of the way with lightning fast speed, thinking

it was an accident (it so wasn't).

But the thing was, none of this was really happening anyway, since it was all a hallucination

. . . so what did it matter? This was the perfect opportunity to practise holding a boy's hand so

that, when the opportunity with Christopher actually arose - and it was going to have to some

day, right? Right? - I'd know what to do.

The minute my fingers touched his, Gabriel stopped looking like he was getting ready to

get up and leave. Instead, his face kind of softened a little, and he even turned his hand over to

hold mine, and, doing that amazing thumb-stroking thing, said, in that deep soothing voice of

his, 'I'll stay until you go to sleep.'

Wow. That sounded nice. Super nice.

And exactly what a hallucination should say. I could only hope Christopher, when the time

came, would be as nice.

But there was still something vaguely wrong. Something was missing from my perfect-boy-

halucination scenario.
Then I realized what it was.

'Will you sing me that song?' I asked, my Page 26 Meg Cabot: Airhead eyelids so heavy I was looking out of mere slits. 'The one you sang . . . ' Where? I didn't even know what I was talking about. All I knew was that I'd heard him sing a song . . . somewhere. I was pretty sure.

He smiled. 'I didn't know you even heard that song,' he said. 'I thought you didn't show up until after my performance was over. But I'll gladly sing it for you.'

What was he talking about?

But then he started singing, super softly, and it didn't matter.

And the sweet notes of the song he was singing soon lulled me all the way to sleep . . . but not before I heard, way off in the furthest reaches of my mind, a voice that sounded a lot like that of the lady with the bun in her hair going, 'Hey, you there! What are you doing in here?'

And the singing stopped.

But by that time I was asleep anyway, and so I didn't care.

A hot guy named Gabriel Luna had sung me to sleep.

A hot guy named Gabriel Luna had brought me roses.

A hot guy named Gabriel Luna had held my hand.

It had to all be a dream. The most perfect dream I had ever had. Or would have been, if it
had been a different boy, and not Gabriel Luna.

I never wanted to wake up.

Except that of course I did. Wake up, I mean.

The next time I opened my eyes, it was daylight again.

And sitting in the chair beside me was a girl who kept shaking my arm and going, 'Nikki!

Nikki, wake up. Wake UP!'

Then, when she saw that my eyes were open, she went, 'Oh, thank God. What are they

pumping into you anyway, to make you sleep so hard? I thought you were in a coma or

something.'

I just blinked at her. She looked familiar somehow, but I couldn't quite figure out how.

Was she someone I knew from school? And if so, why was she talking to me? Because she

was totaly gorgeous - perfectly smooth cafe-au-lait coloured skin, a funky bleached-blonde

pageboy, colarbones so sharp they looked like they could cut through tin cans, like those

knives on TV.

And the gorgeous girls at Tribeca Alternative do not speak to me. Except to ask me to get

out of their way.

'You have no idea how long I've been trying to track you down. Do you know
they've got
rent a cops at al the elevators, to keep people from getting up here to see you? Getting in to
see you is harder than getting a table at Pastis for Sunday brunch,' the girl prattled on. 'I had to
sneak up the stairwel, then hide in the ladies' room until the coast was clear. Thank God I had
a copy of the newest issue of Us Weekly to throw on to the head nurse's desk in order to
distract them long enough for me to sneak by. It's a good thing Britney's on the cover again, or
it never would have worked.'
Slowly, I realized how I knew this girl. Not because I'd been asked by her to move out of
the way in the halways of my school, but because she'd been on the covers of some of Frida's
magazines.

She was Lulu Colins, daughter of Tim Page 27 Meg Cabot: Airhead Colins, the famous
film director whose cinematic adaptation of Journeyquest had made so much money . . . and
almost ruined the whole game for me forever after.
Why in God's name was Lulu Colins sitting beside my hospital bed?
'Anyway' she went on, 'Since no one would tel me anything about what was going on with
you, I just took matters into my own hands. I had to. I know Kely's going to be
mad, but

whatever, I'm your best friend - and she's not going to keep from me what's going on with my

best friend. Also, to tel you the truth, I couldn't take the whining any more. You wouldn't

believe how much she's missed you. So I brought her to see you. I know it's against the rules,

but whatever, some rules are just stupid.'

And without another a word, Lulu Colins reached into her colossal tote bag, and puled

out . . .

. . . Nikki Howard's fluffy white dog.

Which she promptly deposited on my chest.

And can I just say, that dog went mental for me? I have never realy considered myself

much of a dog person. I mean, I like them wel enough, but my parents never thought it was a

great idea for us to have pets, given their wacky living situation (Dad in New Haven, Mom in

New York City).

But this dog. Holy moley, this dog loved me. It was jumping al over me, licking my face,

dislodging wires -

'Oh!' Lulu cried as one of the machines next to my bed began to ping crazily. 'What the -
how do you reconnect this thing? Oh, here . . . stick it back on. STICK IT BACK ON!

I didn't know what she was talking about. Apparently, the wire had been connected by a

sticker . . . to my forehead. I put it back where it had been, and the pinging stopped. Lulu

immediately relaxed.

'Phew,' she said. 'Oh my God, seriously, they are guarding this place like it's the freaking

front door to Cave. And for once, I am so not on the list. Which, whatever. Did you know

Kely won't say what's wrong with you? The press is having a field day. You should see what

they're saying, Nik, it's unfreakingbelievable. I'm just saying no comment cos of what

happened last time. But you look way better than you did then. Seriously. Even though you're

doing the no-make-up thing. Cosy, stop licking her.'

I finally managed to pry the dog away from my face.

But then I saw something that distracted me from both the dog licking me all over and the

girl I had never met before who was acting like she knew me.

And that was that there was a vase of red roses sitting on the windowsill - along with

about a million other bouquets.

But none of the others was red roses.
Wait a minute. Had my hallucination been real? Had Gabriel Luna really come to
visit me,

and sung me to sleep while holding my hand?

No. No way.

'So when are they letting you out of here?' Lulu wanted to know. 'Also, what do you want

me to tel Brandon? Because he's been caling and stopping by the loft nonstop. He's the one

who figured out where you were. And, oh my God, you know that guy from the Stark grand

opening? That British guy, the singer, what's his name . . .'

'Gabriel,' I said. And my heart gave a thud at the mere mention of his name. Man, I was in

trouble. Especially since I didn't even like him. I liked another boy entirely. I mean, didn't I?

'Right, Gabriel,' Lulu said. 'Anyway he sent a whole BASKET of roses to the loft.

Seriously. The whole place stinks of roses now. That guy's got it bad for you. Anyway,

Brandon saw them - he stopped by the other night, thinking he'd catch you at home, which,

you know, as if - and now I think he thinks there's something going on with the two of you.

You and that British guy. Which is good, right? Brandon totally deserves it. I saw him dancing

with Mischa again at Cave, don't be mad, but you've been kind of MIA, and -
Cosy, stop it.'

She tried to pry the dog's tongue off my face again, but it didn't do any good. For such a small puffball of a creature, Nikki Howard's dog possessed a surprising amount of saliva. 'God, I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't have brought her.'

'No,' I said, reaching up to stroke the little dog's soft, curly hair. 'It's OK. It's just that . . .'

Lulu had taken a can of energy drink from her enormous tote, and now she cracked it open and took a sip. 'Sorry,' she said, when she noticed I was looking at the bright pink can.

'I'm so hung over. Oh my God, I was soooo wasted last night, al I had was a PowerBar for lunch and then some popcorn and like twenty mojitos and, ooooh, did you see this?' She waved an enormous ring in my face. 'Justin got it for me. Pink sapphire. What do you think?

I'm worried he's thinking - you know. And I am so not ready to go there. What am I, gonna squeeze out a couple of spawn like Britney? No thanks. But I'm keeping it anyway, because it's so pretty.'

I blinked at her. Was any of this realy happening? Was Lulu Colins realy sitting in my hospital room, teling me that Gabriel Luna had sent a basketful of roses to me,
care of the loft

she and I supposedly shared, and showing off a ring given to her by someone
named Justin

(she had to mean Justin Bay, star of the movie version of Journeyquest. That's
who she was

rumoured to be dating, right? At least according to Frida's latest copy of Us
Weekly, which I'd

just happened to pick up and read. Cover to cover)? What was going on?

Maybe this was a continuation of the dream I'd had about Gabriel Luna.

Except that hadn't been a dream, had it? Because the roses he'd given me were
sitting right

there on the windowsil.

And what about this dog? This dog wasn't a hallucination. I could feel its little
heart

pounding next to mine as it licked my face with its hot, wet tongue.

No, I'm awake. I'm definitely awake.

Which was why I said to Lulu, 'I'm sorry. But I don't have the slightest idea what
you're
talking about. I don't . . . I mean, have we . . . met?'

Lulu's little rosebud mouth fell open. And when it did, I could see she had a wad
of pink

gum in there.

'Oh my God,' she said. 'Is that what's going on? Do you have amnesia? Because
you hit

your head pretty hard when you passed out, Nik. Although Gabriel was al over
you in a
second, and so were the paramedics. Wel, they were already there, working on
that girl the

TV fel on-

'That's another thing,' I said. 'My name's not Nik-

Lulu's mouth closed with a snap. Her eyes narrowed. And suddenly she was on
her feet,

her hands on my shoulders, shaking me, while 'Cosy' barked with alarm.

'What have they done to you?' Lulu shrieked. 'Who was it? Who did this? Was it the

Scientologists? I told you to stay away from those people!

Being shaken - even though it was by a tiny girl who looked like a walking
toothpick - was

causing al the machines at the side of my bed to start Page 29 Meg Cabot:
Airhead beeping.

Also, I can't say it felt al that good.

'Oh my God, Nik, it's me, Lulu,' the girl, who was now kneeling beside me on
my bed,

was screaming at me. 'Your best friend! Your room-mate! Or loft-mate, because,
you know,

we never could share a bathroom, let alone a bedroom, because with your acid
reflux, ew,

but-

'What's going on in here?' demanded a shril voice from the doorway.

And I turned my head to see a nurse staring at us in horror.
'Get away from her!' the nurse yeled. 'Orderly! Orderly!' 

And the next thing I knew, a shrieking Lulu was being yanked off me by a burly man in blue scrubs, while a nurse had grabbed the little white dog - who was snarling pretty ferociously for such a powder puff - and was carrying it out of my room while my mom and Dr Holcombe came rushing into it, both looking white-faced and concerned. 

'Nikki,' Lulu screamed as they carried her off. 'Don't worry, Nikki! I'll be back! I'll get to the bottom of this, if it's the last thing I do -'

Then a door slammed, and both she and the yapping dog were gone. The only sounds were the mad pings and pongs coming from the machines by the side of my bed. 

'Are you al right, honey?' Mom asked me, her eyes wide with alarm. 

'I'm fine,' I said as Dr Holcombe bent over me, checking his wires. 'But what's going on? 

Why did she think she knew me?'

'We're very sorry about that, Emerson,' Dr Holcombe said. He'd succeeded in shutting off most of the alarms. Now there was just the steady ping-ping of my heart monitor. 'The nurses are supposed to keep out non-family members . . . '

'But I don't know Lulu Colins,' I said. 'Why did she think she knows me? Why was she
caling me Nikki? Mom - what's going on?'

'Doctor,' Mom said worriedly. She was chewing on her lower lip, something she only did when she was seriously upset about something - like Dad not getting back to Manhattan in time for one of Frida's clarinet recitals or my science fair. 'Shouldn't we-

'Absolutely not,' Dr Holcombe said. He was messing around with a needle. 'Emerson needs rest.'

'But, Doctor-

'The best thing for her is to . . .' I didn't hear the rest of their conversation. That's because Dr Holcombe did something with the needle he'd been holding - even though I didn't feel a thing - and the next thing I knew,

I was dozing off again, way too sleepy to keep listening.

If I'd known that that sleep was the last truly restful one I was to have for a long, long time,

I'd have tried to enjoy it more.

Airhead
Six

When I opened my eyes again, it was night-time, and Frida was peering down at me. I mean, really staring, like I was some homeless guy passed out in a subway car, covered in my own vomit.

When she saw I was awake, she jumped about a mile back and stared at me with wide, terrified eyes.

I mean it. She looked completely freaked.

'emong

'What's wrong?' I asked her. My voice still sounded weird - al high-pitched and sort of . .

. I don't know. Girlie, or something. But whatever. 'Have I got something on my face?'

I lifted my hand to feel my face. But all I felt was smooth skin. Which was . . . wel,

unusual. I do the best I can, of course, but let's just say I couldn't imagine after however long

I'd been in the hospital, my complexion was looking its best.

But I didn't feel a single bump. Which was a miracle in itself.

'What -' I broke off. Man, my voice sounded strange. It had been a while, I realized, since

I'd had anything to drink. In fact, I was drying up with thirst. Maybe that was it.
Maybe I just needed to drink something. 'Is there water in here or anything?'

'W-water?' Frida stammered. 'You want s-some water?'

'Um, yeah,' I said. I actualy felt awake enough to try to sit up.

Big mistake. The machines next to me started pinging like crazy. Also, al the wires connected to me puled me back down against the pilows.

Not to mention, my head kind of throbbed when I tried to lift it.

'I don't think -' Frida looked horrified - 'I don't think you're supposed to try to get up yet.'

'I kind of got the message,' I said. I reached up to touch one of the wires and found that it was only attached to my head by a sticker. Using my new, long press-on nails, I peeled the sticker off, along with the wire. No pinging. Hmmm.

'I don't think you're supposed to be doing that,' Frida said, her gaze owlish.

'It's fine,' I said, puling off more stickers. Of course, I had no idea whether or not it was fine. I just didn't want to be attached to machines any more. Why should I be, when I felt fine?

I mean, except for the throbbing head. Oh, and the parched throat.

'Is there any water around here?' I asked Frida. 'Does my voice sound weird to you?'

But Frida just stood there, looking like she was about to cry.
And for the first time I noticed she hadn't bothered with her morning blow-dry. Her hair was a mass of staticky tangles threatening to engulf her pale, tear-stained face. She didn't have any make-up on either, and instead of being dressed at the height of Teen Chic, she had on one of Mom's old sweaters and a pair of her most faded jeans.

This, more than anything else - including the roses from Gabriel Luna, which I saw were stil on the window-sil, though they were a lot droopier than before, and that extremely odd visit from Lulu Colins - disturbed me. I mean, Frida has been scrupulous about her appearance since . . . wel, her whole life. I can't remember a time when she wasn't freaking out over a blackhead, much less when she last left the house without mascara. And here she was, cosmetic free, and looking like death warmed up.

'Hey,' I said. 'What's the matter with you? You look like somebody just told you American Idol is fixed. Which I'm pretty sure it is, by the way.'

'I . . .' Frida blinked a few times. And an actual tear slid out from beneath one eyelid. 'I just can't believe . . . it's you.'

'Wel, of course it's me,' I said. Seriously, what was wrong with my little sister? I've always
thought she spent way too much time obsessing about how she looks, and not enough time
reading books . . . even comic books. But stil. This was ridiculous. She looked like . . . wel,
as Lulu would put it, crap. 'Who else would it be?'

Something about that question made Frida's face crumple. And suddenly, she was
crying. Realy crying.

'Hey,' I said, concerned. 'What's wrong?'

'Wel, wel, wel, look who's up,' boomed a voice from the doorway, startling both of us. I
turned my head, and saw Dr Holcombe coming into the room, folowed by my parents. Both
of them smiled when they saw I was awake.

'She . . . she wants some water,' Frida squeaked, stil looking wide-eyed as a rat caught in
the headlight of a Number 6 train.

'I think we can safely accommodate that request,' Dr Holcombe said in a cheerful tone.

'Go and ask the nurses for a pitcher and a glass, wil you, Frida?'

Frida, looking relieved to have an excuse to get out of my room, skittered away.

Meanwhile, Dr Holcombe found some of the stickers - the wires stil attached - that I'd puled
off. He made a tsk-tsking noise.

'Now now,' he said, lifting one and placing it gently back on my forehead. 'I'm
glad you're feeling better, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. You're still a very sick girl.'

'I don't feel sick,' I said. 'Except for my head. My head hurts. But just a little.'

'That's to be expected,' the doctor said, still messing with my wires. 'You've got to rest.'

I looked at my parents for some sign they disagreed with the doctor. Because he had to be exaggerating. Since I felt relatively all right. I mean, if I was sick, wouldn't I feel worse?

But Mom and Dad both looked pretty worried.

'You should do what Dr. Holcombe says, honey,' Mom said, patting my hand. 'He knows what he's doing.'

That was probably true. But still.

'I don't understand,' I said. 'What's wrong with me? What happened?'

'They've got you on some pretty heavy duty medications,' Dad said in this weirdly cheerful tone. Kind of like he didn't actually feel cheerful, but someone had told him to act that way.

Around me, anyway. I don't know what made me think of that, but once the idea occurred to me, I couldn't shake it.

'That's right,' Dr. Holcombe said, sounding pretty cheerful himself. 'And with luck, we'll be weaning you off some of those medications soon. But not quite yet.'
So I was on drugs. Wel, that made sense. I'd been pretty sure I had to be, considering

how much I'd been sleeping . . . not to mention the hallucinations.

But a glance at the windowsil told me not al of it had been in my head. Also, the droopy

state of the roses told me something else.

'How long?' I asked.

'Until we can start cutting back on your medications?' Dr Holcombe was checking the

machines next to my bed. 'Wel, that's hard to say-'

'No,' I said. 'I mean how long have I been in the hospital? How much school

have I

missed?'

'You don't need to worry about that, Em,' Dad said, in his fake-cheerful voice. 'We've
talked to al your teachers, and -'

They'd talked to al my teachers? They'd been to my school? Oh my God. Why couldn't

this part be a halucination, and not the part where Lulu Colins thought she was my best

friend?

'How long?' I repeated, my weird voice - what was up with that anyway - trembling a

little.

'Not long at al,' Dr Holcombe replied. 'Just a little over a month.'
'A month!' I tried to sit up, but of course all that happened was that the machines on either side of my bed started going nuts - especially the heart monitor, because I was having a panic attack thinking about all the work I was going to have to make up. Plus, I felt dizzy. And not just at the prospect of all the homework awaiting me.

It was of course at this point that Frida decided to walk back into the room, holding a water pitcher and glass she'd snagged from somewhere. Hearing all the commotion, she froze in the doorway, apparently thinking I was having some kind of attack.

'Is she - is she -' Frida stood there, bug-eyed and stammering.

'She's fine,' Mom said emphatically, pressing down on my shoulder to keep me from sitting up. 'Em, stop it. You have a lot more important things to worry about than school right now.'

Was she kidding? What could be more important than school?

'I'm gonna be held back!' I insisted. 'I'm going to have to repeat eleventh grade!' '

'No, you aren't,' Mom said. 'Please, Em. Calm down. Doctor, can you give her something -'

'Oh no,' I yelped. 'You are not putting me to sleep again! I need my laptop! Somebody needs to go home and get my laptop so I can start catching up. Does this room have Wi-Fi?'
'Now now,' Dr Holcombe said, chuckling a little. 'Let's take it one step at a time, young lady. Frida, come here with that water.'

Frida, still looking at me like I was some creature who'd crawled from the deep, came forward, holding the glass of water she'd poured with a trembling hand.

'H-here,' she said.

I lifted my hand and took the glass from her - noticing again, as I did so, the glamorous long fingernails she'd glued over my bitten ones. 'Thanks - and for the manicure too,' I added.

'I . . . I didn't give you a manicure,' Frida said in a voice that shook.

'Right,' I said. I took the glass . . .

But because I wasn't alowed to sit up, it wasn't easy to drink from it. Also, somehow I missed my mouth, so the ice-cold water went pouring down my Page 33 Meg Cabot: Airhead neck and into my hospital gown.

Which just made me madder than ever. 'What the-

'Now now,' Dr Holcombe said, mopping up the worst of it with his own handkerchief.

'See what I mean? Let's take things one day at a time, shal we? Homework can wait. Want to try that again?'

I really was parched. I nodded, and this time Mom helped me get the cup to my
lips, and

the water - the coolest, most delicious water I had ever tasted - made it into my mouth instead

of all down my gown.

'There now,' Dr Holcombe said. 'That's better. Do you think you'll be wanting to tackle

some food soon?'

Just the word food made my stomach rumble. I nodded eagerly, and Dr Holcombe looked

pleased.

'Frida,' he said to my sister. 'Why don't you run down to the cafeteria and get something

your sister might like. What do you feel like eating, Emerson?'

'I know what she'll feel like eating,' Mom said, her nose wrinkling a little, the way it always
does when she's about to say something she thinks is funny. 'Ice-cream sundae. Right, Em?'

'With a chocolate-chip cookie on the side,' Dad said, looking a little more like his normal

self, and not Fake Cheerful Guy.

'Is that what you want . . . Em?' Frida asked.

Except, weirdly . . . it wasn't.

'Sure,' I said. Because I couldn't remember a time when I hadn't wanted ice cream and a

cookie. Until now.
Oddly though, that 'Sure' turned out to be the right thing to say. Because for the first time

since I'd woken up and seen her, Frida smiled. Tentatively, but stil. It was a smile. Then she

said, 'Be right back,' and took off.

Which was pretty strange in itself. I mean, when was the last time my little sister had ever

been eager to bring me food . . . in bed? The fact that Frida was so wiling to fetch and carry

for me told me way more about how hurt I must be than my dad's fake cheer or my mom's

teariness.

'So what happened?' I asked when Frida was safely out of earshot. 'Why am I here? Was

there an accident? A subway accident?'

Mom frowned. 'You don't remember? Going to Stark's? Anything?'

Going to Stark's? Gabriel had mentioned something about Stark's, too. A grand opening.

Something about those words seemed to tickle my memory, but when I tried to remember, it

was like it was just out of my grasp . . .

'We don't have to talk about that now,' Dr Holcombe said hastily. 'Let's concentrate on

getting you better.'

'I know,' I said. 'But I mean . . . I've been out of school for a month? What, have I been in
a coma or something?'

'The, er, accident didn't cause the coma,' Mom said gently. 'Dr Holcombe placed you in a chemical coma, so that you could heal more comfortably. He's been bringing you slowly out of it over the past few days, to see how you were doing.'

'Wel,' I said. 'What part of me is hurt, exactly? Because I feel pretty good. Except for my head. And my voice. Do you hear how weird my voice sounds?'

My mom and dad looked at Dr Holcombe, Page 34 Meg Cabot: Airhead who said to me,

'Wel, Emerson, the truth is, your injuries were, in fact, extremely severe. We used a special technique we've developed in order to save your life, since the type of injury you suffered is, in fact, fatal.'

I blinked at him. 'But I'm alive.'

'Because the procedure worked,' Dad explained.

'Worked isn't the word for it,' Dr Holcombe enthused, his eyes glittering excitedly behind his plastic-framed glasses. 'Your recovery up until now has far, far surpassed our expectations.

We certainly didn't expect you to be speaking, much less for you to possess any sort of motor skills, until many days from now, if not weeks. But like with any risky medical procedure, no
one can be one hundred per cent certain of the outcome. And you're going to notice that some things - like your voice, for instance, which you already mentioned - might not seem the same as they did before your accident-

'That's why it's very important that you do what the doctors and nurses here tell you,' Dad said.

'Such as, don't take off your sensors,' Dr Holcombe said, picking up one he'd missed before and attaching it to my temple.

'And no homework,' Mom said. She'd recovered herself and wiped the tears from her eyes. Now she attempted a smile . . . and didn't do a half bad job at it. 'Understand? You need to concentrate on getting better first. Then we'll worry about what's going to happen with school.'

'Fine,' I said, glancing from her face to Dad's, looking for some clue - any clue - as to what was really going on. Why were they treating me like I was in the first grade? Concentrate on getting better? Who did they think they were kidding? Why wasn't anyone leveling with me?

'But . . . I've really been in here a month? Can I at least call Christopher and find out what's
happening in school? He must be wondering how I am. I'm his only friend, you know . . .'

But no one exactly rushed to get me a phone. Instead everyone said I needed to rest, that

Christopher was fine and that they'd get me my laptop (my other request) soon. And Dr

Holcombe did cal a nurse over to unplug some of my more intrusive and bothersome wires

(not al of them, it turned out, were attached to a sticker. Some of them were attached to

needles that went UNDER my skin. It was quite a relief to get rid of those, in addition to the

ones that pinged so noisily every time I moved).

So by the time Frida got back with my ice cream and cookie, everyone was treating me

less like a hospital patient and a little more like a normal person.

'Here,' Frida said, putting the ice cream - which she'd slathered with hot fudge, whipped

cream and nuts - on the bed tray one of the nurses had set up in front of me. Next to the ice

cream lay an enormous chocolate-chip cookie - the kind I used to eat four or five of a day, if I

had the money for them.

Now the thought of putting any of that sugary stuff into my mouth actualy made me feel a

little sick. Which was weird, because normaly dessert is my favourite meal of
the day.

Still, everyone - Mom and Dad, Frida, Dr Holcombe, three nurses who had wandered

into my room and the orderly who had been in my hallucination (because it had definitely been

a hallucination. No way had Lulu Colins been in my room . . . with Nikki Howard's dog, no

less) - seemed to be holding their breath, waiting for me to take a taste of the sundae Frida

had brought me.

So I did the only thing I could. I lifted the spoon and dipped it into the bowl. Then I

brought it - carefully, remembering what had happened with the water - to my lips and took a

big bite.

'Mmmm,' I said.

Everyone in the room exhaled at the same time. And smiled. And laughed. The orderly

high-fived one of the nurses. While I took a really fast gulp of water. Because all that sugar? It

tasted totally gross to me.

What was happening to me? Since when did I hate ice cream?

What had this doctor done to me?

Fortunately no one noticed. Everyone chattered away about how great it was that I was
making so much progress so soon.

Which was flattering and al, but might have meant more to me if I'd known exactly what I was making progress from. I mean, what was I supposed to be recovering from? What had happened to me? Which part of me was hurt?

And what exactly was this 'procedure' they'd used on me?

Dr Holcombe had been right about one thing: I was beginning to notice that some things were different than they’d been before the accident.

And not just my not liking ice cream any more. That was the least of it. The weirdest thing so far was how the people in my own family acted around me . . . as if they didn't know me.

Almost as if - and I know it sounded crazy - but almost as if I was someone else.

Airhead
Seven

'What - what's going on?'

That's what I asked the doctor and nurse - both wearing full surgery gowns, including masks - who showed up in what seemed to be the middle of the night to shake me awake,

then transfer me from my bed to a hospital wheeled stretcher.

'Shh,' said the nurse, pointing at my mom, dozing in the chair next to my bed. 'Don't wake her up. She's exhausted.'

'But where are we going?' I asked, stiffly rolling from my bed to the stretcher.

'Just to do some tests,' the doctor whispered.

'In the middle of the night?' I asked groggily 'Can't they wait until morning?'

'These are very important tests,' the nurse said. 'They can't wait.'

'OK,' I said, sinking down against the thin mattress. As usual, I was so tired. I was dimly aware that they were wheeling me down a long, empty hospital corridor. But they could have been rolling me down the middle of Times Square and I wouldn't have known the difference,

that's how sleepy I was.

'How we doing?' the doctor asked when he stopped the stretcher to push the button to an
elevator, way down at the end of the hal, about a thousand miles, it seemed, from my room.

'Fine,' I murmured, at the same time that the nurse pulled her mask down to say, 'Looks good so far. There was no one even sitting at the nurses' station. The whole floor is empty. I think we're going to make it.'

That's when I got my first good look at her.

And I realized she wasn't a nurse at all.

'Hey,' I said, feeling suddenly wide awake. I leaned up on my elbows. And, my head didn't feel at all throbby any more. 'You're -'

The elevator doors chose that moment to slide open.

'Go!' Lulu Colins yelled at the guy in the surgical mask.

'What do you think you're doing?' I demanded as the two of them rammed my hospital stretcher into the elevator.

'We're kidnapping you,' Lulu explained, stabbing the button marked B for basement. 'But it's all right. It's us, Nik. Me and Brandon. Show her, Brandon.'

And the doctor - although I guess that's not who he was after all - peeled off his surgical mask and looked down at me.
'It's me, Nik,' he said, smiling broadly. 'Brandon. See? Everything's going to be all right.

We came to rescue you.'

'Rescue -' I blinked right back at him. He was young, blond and impossibly handsome.

And clearly completely insane.

'I think there's been a really big mistake,' I said. Was I hallucinating again? Except that I couldn't be. Because hallucinations were never this detailed, were they? I could hear each ping of the elevator as it went down. And I could smell Lulu's fruity perfume (or maybe that was her gum). And I could see that Brandon was sprouting a pretty serious case of five o'clock - in this case, five o'clock in the morning - blond shadow along his jaw.

It wasn't until we emerged from the elevator into the hospital's underground garage, and my captors wheeled me towards a limo - yes. A limo. Black stretch - that I realized just how dire the situation really was. Because there wasn't even anyone around to hear me if I screamed for help. The place was echoingly empty.

That's when Lulu turned to Brandon and said, 'She's not going to get in wilingly. She stil has no idea who we are.' And he gave a sigh, turned around and swiftly yanked me off the
stretcher and over his shoulder.

Now, I may have just spent a month in a coma or whatever. But I wasn't about to let

myself get kidnapped by a celebutante and her FFBF henchman. I sucked in my breath and let

out a shriek that I swear had to have been heard halfway to New Jersey -
- if there'd been anybody around to hear it, that is.

There wasn't. Brandon stuffed me, kicking and biting any part of him with which I came

into contact, into the rear seat of the limo, then settled into the seat opposite mine and sat there

looking hurt. And not just physically.

'Jesus, Nikki,' he said, as Lulu jumped in beside him and yeled at the chauffeur to go . . .

'It's me. Brandon! You know me. We're going out!'

And the thing of it was . . . I kind of did recognize him. Seriously. From some of Frida's

magazines. It was Brandon Stark - as in Stark Megastores. Page 37 Meg Cabot: Airhead

Brandon Stark as in the Brandon Stark, Nikki Howard's on-again, off-again album-producing

boyfriend. Brandon Stark as in heir to the Stark family fortune . . . which one magazine of

Frida's put at a net worth of like a bilion dolars or something.

Which pretty much makes him the richest person I've ever met.
But that stil didn't mean it was OK for him to grab me and then stuff me in a
limo like that.
'What's wrong with you?' I demanded of both him and Lulu. 'Can't you see I'm
sick?'
'I'm sorry,' Lulu said, puling off her surgical gown and mask. I could see that,
underneath
it, her make-up and skintight black catsuit were stil perfectly in place. 'It's just
that we couldn't
think of any other way to get you out of there. I mean, seeing as how they're
brainwashing
you.'
'No one is brainwashing me,' I cried. 'What are you talking about? I don't even
know you!'
This was the wrong thing to say. Lulu and Brandon exchanged glances.
'See what I mean?' she asked him under her breath.
Brandon, meanwhile - al six-foot four or five of him - gaped down at me. He
was so
good-looking, in a frat-boy way - sort of like Jason Klein, Whitney's boyfriend.
He had a big
square jaw and blond hair that hung a little bit into his green eyes . . . but maybe
that was just
because he was stil partialy wearing the surgical mask on top of his head. 'Nikki
. . . what did
they do to you?'
'Yeah,' I complained. 'That's the other thing. Why do you people keep caling me
Nikki?'


'Oh God.' Lulu dropped her head into her hands, while Brandon just stared at me as if I'd asked him why carbon-based life forms need to breathe oxygen.

The limo driver turned his head and asked calmly, 'Back to Ms Howard's loft, Mr Stark?'

Lulu lifted her head to say, 'Oh God, yes.' She looked over at Brandon, slumped beside her. 'Maybe if she sees something familiar . . . '

'Yeah, to the loft, Tom,' Brandon said in a dejected voice.

'You guys can't do this,' I said, trying to stay calm. Which wasn't easy, considering everything that was going on. I mean, that I had just been kidnapped. In a hospital gown, no less. I didn't even have any shoes on. So it wasn't like I could throw myself at the car door and bail.

'Nikki,' Lulu said in a patient voice. 'We're doing this for you. Because we love you.

Whatever they've told you . . . it's a lie. Al right? We're your friends.'

'I'm more than your friend,' Brandon said, coming to sit beside me. A little too close to me, actualy. Why was he . . . looking at me like that? The neon lights from the signs on the buildings we were driving past along Second Avenue flickered across his face, turning it from pink to blue to green and then back again. 'I'm your boyfriend. How can you not
remember me?'

I had to hand it to him . . . he sounded genuinely upset. He wasn't faking it. His deep voice broke on the word boyfriend, and everything. It was almost moving.

Or at least, it would have been, if I hadn't been convinced the two of them were completely off their rockers.

'If you guys make this limo turn round,' I said, trying to keep my voice from shaking (yeah.

Good luck with that), 'and take me back to the hospital, I promise I won't press kidnapping charges. No one will have to know. Just drop me off and I'll never mention it again.'

'Kidnapping?' Brandon looked stunned. 'We aren't kidnapping you!'

'Yes, we are, actually,' Lulu said to him. She'd dug an energy drink from the limo's mini-

fridge and was gulping from it. 'I mean, that's what this is, realy. Only I prefer the term intervention.'

'How can she not know who we are?' Brandon asked her. 'Who she is?'

Lulu shook her head. 'I told her to stay away from those Scientologists . . .' I took a deep breath, stil fighting for calm.

'I don't know what the two of you are talking about, but I think there's been some kind of
misunderstanding. My name is Emerson Watts. My parents - who are going to be very upset

when they find out I'm missing from my hospital room, by the way - are Daniel Watts and

Karen Rosenthal-Watts. I don't know why you guys seem to think I'm Nikki - Howard, I

presume. Because I'm not.'

The two of them blinked at me with a lack of comprehension that was, to say the least,

absolute. Their gazes were as blank as Frida's always got when I was trying to explain the finer

points of role-play gaming to her.

But I'd never let that stop me before, and I wasn't about to now either.

'Up until very recently,' I went on, 'I was an eleventh-grader at Tribeca Alternative High

School. Then about a month ago, I was . . . I don't know. In an accident of some kind. I'm not

real clear about the details, actually. But when I woke up, I was in the hospital you just

kidnapped me from. Which I would like to go back to. Now.'

My voice rose a little hysterically on the word now. But overall I managed to deliver that

speech with a reasonable amount of composure. Certainly more than I actually felt, considering

I was being held in a limo against my will by a couple of teenaged socialites.

Also, I noticed no one had offered me an energy drink. And I was really thirsty.
'My God,' was al Brandon said about my speech. And he sort of let that slip out like he hadn't wanted it to.

'I know,' Lulu said, not taking her completely blank gaze off me. 'It'll be al right when we get her home. When she sees her stuff she'll be fine. I mean, look at that dress. You know she'd never be caught dead in a dress like that if she was in her right mind.'

That's when I realized she was referring to my hospital gown. As a dress.

'That's it,' I said. I turned in my seat and spoke directly to Tom, the limo driver. 'Pull over and let me out, or you'll be joining these two in jail for unlawful imprisonment.'

To my surprise, the limo stopped. But only, it turned out, because we'd reached our destination.

'Sorry, Ms Howard,' the limo driver said, Page 39 Meg Cabot: Airhead sounding like he meant it. 'Just following orders.'

Why does everyone keep calling me that?' I practicaly shrieked.

'Calling you what, ma'am?' Tom wanted to know.

'Ms Howard,' I hissed. And Nikki.'

'Wel,' Tom said, looking uncomfortable, 'maybe because that's your name, ma'am?'

'I told you people,' I said, stil addressing the limo driver. 'My name is Emerson Watts. I'm
not Nikki Howard.'

'Um, actualy, ma'am,' he said, turning the rear-view mirror in my direction, 'you are.'

And I raised my gaze.

And screamed.

Airhead
Eight

Wel, you'd probably have screamed too, if the face you saw looking back at you from a

mirror belonged to someone else.

Not just someone else, but someone whose face happened to be plastered on magazines

and the sides of buses and phone booths al over town. Wearing nothing but a bra

and a pair

of panties.

 Seriously. I looked into the limo's rear-view mirror, and I saw Nikki Howard's face staring

back at me.

Only when I raised my hand to cover my mouth in horror - Nikki raised her hand too.

And when I dropped my hand away - so did Nikki.

That's when I started to shake.

And I couldn't stop.

'How . . .' I asked no one in particular. 'How could this have happened?'

'That's what WE'VE been trying to figure out,' Lulu said. 'Now do you see why we had to

kidnap you? I mean, stage an intervention on you?'

I lifted trembling fingers to my hair . . . I mean, to Nikki Howard's hair. It cascaded from
the top of my head (or Nikki's head) from a sloppy ponytail, which was how I hadn't noticed

the long blonde strands around my shoulders: because they'd been just out of my sight line.

And there hadn't been any mirrors in my hospital room.

'I'm . . . I'm a model,' I wailed to my reflection.

And now, finally, the reason my voice sounded so strange made sense. Because the voice

I was hearing wasn't my own. It was Nikki Howard's voice, breathy, high-pitched and girlie . .

. completely unlike my own.

'Right,' Lulu said slowly. 'Do you Page 40 Meg Cabot: Airhead remember me now? Lu-lu.

Lulu Colins. Your room-mate? I mean, loft-mate?'

I looked at her. She appeared to be genuinely concerned about me. I mean, despite the

ridiculous Mission: Impossible black catsuit - obviously her idea of how a kidnapper would

dress . . . if any kidnapper in her right mind would put on black suede thigh-highs with five-inch

stiletto heels - she looked vulnerable and sort of sweet, with her kohl-rimmed eyes, bird-like

bone structure and sparkle lipgloss.

But then I remembered. It wasn't ME she was concerned about. It was Nikki Howard.

Whom I - despite what the mirror was telling me - most definitely was NOT.
'Come on,' Brandon said, gently taking my arm. 'Let's go up to the loft to talk about this.

You probably want to change into your own clothes, right? Have a little something to eat?'

In spite of everything - the fact that I was wearing someone else's face; the fact that Brandon Stark, voted one of People magazine's most eligible bachelors, and Lulu Collins had just kidnapped me; the fact that my parents had no idea where I was and were probably worried to death about me; the fact that my entire family had apparently been lying to me this whole time, not to mention keeping me from seeing my reflection - I couldn't keep my stomach from giving a massive, angry gurgle at the word eat. The truth was, whoever I was . . . I was starving.

Everyone heard it. Brandon put a hand on my wrist - or should I say Nikki Howard's wrist, which, now that I was looking at it, looked nothing like my own wrist, being both bony and devoid of not only a yellow Live strong band but also the forever bracelet Frida had made for me last summer when we'd both been camp counselors - and said gently, 'Come on inside and we'll get you some food.'
'Yeah,' Lulu said, suddenly seeming to perk up. 'There's some leftover blackened sea bass from Nobu. Your favourite. I just have to pop it in the microwave.'

The next thing I knew, we were crossing a colossal marble lobby - Lulu Colins and Nikki Howard, it turns out, share a loft in a converted nineteenth-century police station in SoHo, not five blocks from my own apartment building - and getting into a brass and mahogany elevator,

with a uniformed lift operator, who tipped his gold-braid-trimmed hat at me and said, 'Miss Howard. Nice to see you. Been awhile.'

'Yeah,' I said queasily. It was a realy good thing Brandon Stark was holding on to my arm, because otherwise I was pretty sure I'd have faleen down. Not just from hunger, but because I was so completely freaked out by everything that was going on.

Not to mention the fact that I was walking around in someone else's body. Barefoot. In a hospital gown.

Which the lift operator didn't seem to find at al unusual, if the way he threw open the door when we got to Lulu and Nikki's loft and went, 'Have a good night, Ms Howard, Ms Colins and Mr Stark,' in a totaly nice way was any indication.

And then my bare feet sank into deep, impossibly soft white carpeting. And I
found myself

standing in a gargantuan loft space, with a huge marble fireplace (fire unlit) at the one end and a

high-tech kitchen - al black granite and stainless steel - at the other, with ceilings that towered

ten feet over the top of my head, and windows al along both sides, looking out over the

rooftops of SoHo on one side and the Lower East Side on the other.

The overall decor theme seemed to be expensive. And modern. Above the fireplace was a

massive flat-panel TV that was showing a video of the inside of an aquarium, to make it look

like the TV was realy an aquarium and not a TV. Scattered throughout the place were long

white couches that looked as if they'd swalow you whole if you sat on them. On the coffee

tables in front of the couches were magazines. On the cover of each of the magazines was

Nikki Page 41 Meg Cabot: Airhead Howard's face.

Or, should I say, my face.

Brandon steered me towards one of the couches and then gently pushed me down on to it.

Immediately I was engulfed in softness.

'Sit right there, Nik,' he said concernedly. 'Lulu, you got something for her to eat?'

'Coming right up,' Lulu said, puling open the door to the Sub-Zero refrigerator.
'And maybe something hot to drink,' Brandon added, looking down at me. 'She's shivering.'

Brandon looked around, then found a cream-coloured blanket that had been tossed down at one end of the couch. He pick it up, then settled it over my shoulders, gently tucking it around me. It felt soft as dandelion down. I glanced at the tag attached to one end of it.

One hundred per-cent cashmere.

It figured.

As he arranged the blanket around me, I looked up and happened to meet his gaze. He really was extremely good-looking. I mean, if you happened to like the totally cut, perfect-looking type, which I myself do not. I prefer the loose-limbed, long-haired, computer-genius type. At least, I always thought I did. I had to admit, though, that Brandon Stark's eyes, in the light from the crazy modern chandelier overhead, looked very appealingly green.

'Hey,' he said to me softly, when our gazes met. 'Hi.'

I had no idea what was about to happen next. That's because no guy had ever been that close to me before . . . except Christopher, of course.

But Christopher has never thought of me as a girl. And then there was also Gabriel Luna.
But that had been a hallucination. Hadn't it?

In any case, how was I supposed to know that when a guy leans in that close, he's planning on trying something? I just assumed I had something on my face that Brandon was going to brush off.

Except that I didn't. Unless he was planning on brushing it off with his lips. Which suddenly landed on mine. Since the next thing I knew, Brandon Stark was kissing me.

Kissing me? I'm sorry. Brandon Stark was performing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on me.

Which I found, to my surprise, that I thoroughly enjoyed.

Or at least, Nikki Howard's body thoroughly enjoyed it. How else can I explain the fact that I was totally kissing him back? And I had never even kissed a guy before.

Still, I could totally see why everyone was so crazy about kissing. In the romance novels that Frida left lying around the apartment all the time (and which I occasionally picked up when I had nothing else to read), the heroines were always going on and on about what it felt like when the guy they were in love with kissed them. They talked about their mouths burning like 'liquid fire', and their loins being al aflame.
My loins definitely didn't go up in flames when Brandon kissed me. And my lips didn't burn like liquid fire (whatever that was).

But they felt pleasantly toasty. Realy pleasantly toasty.

And I wasn't even in love with Brandon. Imagine what it must feel like to be kissed by someone you actualy liked. Imagine what it would have felt like if, say, Christopher had kissed me . . .

Which was when I realized, however much my body - or Nikki's body - might have liked what was going on, I totaly couldn't let it go on a second longer. Especialy since it seemed like kissing could very, very easily turn into something else if I didn't put a stop to it, tout de suite.

'Mmph,' I said, pushing Brandon away so hard our mouths disconnected with a sucking sound.

And Brandon ended up losing his balance and almost careened face first into the sofa.

'What?' he asked, looking hurt as he stumbled back to his feet. 'I missed you! Is that so wrong?'

I guess for a lot of girls, getting kissed by Brandon Stark - who is, admittedly, a known
heart-throb - would be a total thril. Frida, for instance, undoubtedly would have
freaked (in a
good way) over Brandon kissing her. She'd even have enjoyed being kidnapped
by him too,
I'm sure.
And I wasn't unappreciative of the fact that Brandon was super handsome, and
seemed
really very interested in me.
But that was the problem. He wasn't. Interested in me, I mean.
He was interested in Nikki Howard.
And I wasn't interested in him.
'I . . . I'm sorry,' I said to him confusedly. Because I did feel sorry, when I saw his
hurt
expression. And also when I felt the rush of cold air that swooped in between
where our warm
mouths had been attached. A part of me wished I had just let him go on kissing
me. Because
kissing? Totally not overrated. At al. 'It's just that . . . I don't even know you.'
'We've been going out for two years,' Brandon cried, looking even more hurt. 'I
mean, on
and off. How can you not remember?'
I puled the blanket around me more tightly. I didn't know what else to do. Or say.
My
mouth felt al weird from where his lips had been pressed up against it. His
stubble had felt al
scratchy. It kind of hurt.

But like . . . in a good way. There was no denying that my lips felt super tingly where his

had touched them. And I was sort of starting to detect some fire in my loinage area now.

Oh my God! Nikki Howard is a total slut! Or maybe I am, and I had just never had an

opportunity to discover it until now!

What is wrong with me? Why had Christopher never made a move on me before, the way

Brandon just had? We could have been making out this whole time, instead of playing of

stupid Journeyquest!

Oh, wait . . . did I just think that? God! What's happening to me?

Fortunately, Lulu appeared just then, holding a pile of clothes.

'Here,' she said, depositing what looked like jeans, a T-shirt and some frily underthings on

to the couch beside me. 'I thought you might want to put this stuff on. I mean, that dress isn't

exactly doing anything for you, you know.'

'Um,' I said. 'It's a hospital gown, not a dress. But thanks.' I picked up the pile of clothes,

then hesitated, looking around the loft.

Lulu heaved a sigh. 'I can't believe you don't remember. Your room's down there,' she
said, pointing towards a door off to one side of the kitchen. 'The food'l probably be ready when you're done.'

I thanked her and got up, a little unsteadily, stil clutching the blanket around me. I didn't look at Brandon as I made my way down the length of the loft. For one thing, walking in my new body was . . . wel, weird.

For another, I could feel his gaze boring into my back the whole time.

I couldn't exactly blame him. If his lips felt anything like mine did, it was realy hard not to go running right back over there and smack them right back on to his.

How do couples not just go around kissing al the time? Kissing is fantastic.

Oh my God. I've known I'm a model for five minutes, and this is how my thought process erodes? I've got to get a hold of myself.

I opened the door to Nikki Howard's bedroom, relieved to be out of Brandon's sight line - and was hit in the face by the overwhelming fragrance of roses.

I soon saw why. The 'basket' of red roses Lulu had told me had been delivered to the loft - the ones from Gabriel Luna - sat on top of Nikki Howard's vanity table. Only the 'basket' was actualy a wooden crate . . . a wooden crate filed to the brim with roses.

Jeez. Gabriel didn't mess around, did he?
Nikki's bedroom, I saw, was a lot like her living room... all white, with a thick furry carpet and a vast, soft-looking bed. In fact, the only colour in the room came from Gabriel's roses. The floor-to-ceiling windows were covered with white satin curtains. A huge mirror - half hidden by Gabriel's crate of roses - hung over the white vanity table in one corner. In the mirror, I could see my reflection - a pale, skinny blonde girl in a hospital gown, wearing a terrified expression and clutching a pile of clothes to her chest, and a cashmere blanket around her shoulders.

Right. A pale, skinny blonde girl who, if Frida's CosmoGIRL! was right, earned something like twenty grand a day.

Unlike in my own room, back home, Nikki hadn't decorated her walls with postcards of paintings or posters of movies she liked. Nor were there piles of science-fiction and fantasy books and journals and mangas lying around, threatening to topple over at any moment. In fact, there wasn't even so much as a photo on her nightstand. Although Nikki did own a computer - a Stark-brand laptop (in a hideous shade of pink) which sat on the vanity table.
near her bed - she didn't appear to own much of anything else, really, except a Stark-brand

flat-screen television, which was affixed to the wal across from her bed.

And make-up. At least, that's all I found in every drawer I pulled open, looking for . . . I
don't even know what.


Which I supposed she needed, considering all the kissing she was apparently doing. She

probably had to reapply a lot.

And, when I opened another door, I saw that while Nikki didn't appear to own any

books, she did own a lot of clothes. There was a whole walk-in closet full of them - what

looked like thousands of shirts, blouses, jackets, jeans, Page 44 Meg Cabot:
Airhead trousers,

dresses and skirts of every description and colour, each item hanging neatly on a wooden

hanger. Some of them were so new they still had price tags on them. I found more than one

pair of $400 jeans, and a pretty plain-looking dress with a tag that said $3,000 (which had to

be a mistake). Beneath and above the hanging clothes were shelves containing literally

hundreds of purses, bags, totes and shoes of every type imaginable . . . boots, sneakers, flats,
heels, sandals, pumps, even, for some reason, wooden clogs, like the Dutch Boy wears.

Frida, I knew, would have felt as if she'd died and gone to heaven if she'd walked into

Nikki Howard's closet. Al I felt, however, was confused. What kind of teenaged girl could

afford $400 jeans? Who even needed $400 jeans? And who kept her stuff so . . .

kind of freaky in a way. I didn't like being in that closet. Not one bit.

I hurried out of it and tried the other door . . . and found myself in Nikki Howard's

bathroom.

Unlike the rest of the loft, this room wasn't white. The walls were made of a
taupe-
coloured marble - the ones that weren't mirrored, that is. There was a walk-in

shower and a

separate Jacuzzi tub. The mirror above the double sinks was surrounded by

lights, dressing-

room style. The reflection I saw blinking back at me in that mirror looked scared.

I put down the pile of clothes Lulu had given me and reached up to undo the

ponytail

someone had put my (or, more accurately, Nikki Howard's) hair into. It came

tumbling down

my shoulders, looking as unlike my own hair as any hair ever could. Instead of

being stick
straight and brown, Nikki Howard's hair was silky and golden and hung in perfectly curled waves . . . even though it clearly hadn't been brushed - or washed - in a while.

And when I reached behind me to undo the hospital gown, and it fell away to land in a puddle at my (I mean, Nikki Howard's) feet, I saw a body as unlike my own as the hair was.

It was the same absolutely perfect - by the Walking Dead's standards - body I'd seen in countless Victoria's Secret ads featuring Nikki Howard. There were no surprises there. None at all.

Except the main one - that suddenly, that perfect body appeared to be my own.

I looked away from the mirror and hurried into the clothes Lulu had given me - a pair of frily pink knickers and an equaly frily bra first. Then jeans, which slid on to fit like a second skin, and the T-shirt - which, disappointingly, bore the words Baby Soft across the front, in pink curlicue writing - which did little to hide what the under-wire bra was emphasizing. This was certainly unlike the shirts stocked in my own closet back home, which I'd selected based on their ability to HIDE what Nikki Howard apparently appeared to prefer to flaunt.

Hurrying from the bathroom and into the closet to grab a pair of Skechers, the
lowest-heeled shoes I could find, I threw them on.

Then, giving a last look at this room that supposedly belonged to me - but that, in a million years, I'd never have been able to keep that clean - I staggered back to the bedroom door,

threw it open . . .

And was attacked all over again.

**Airhead**
Nine

It was OK though. Because this time, instead of a couple of FFBFs in surgical masks, my

assailant was nine inches high and only weighed a half Page 45 Meg Cabot: Airhead dozen

pounds. The minute she saw me come out of Nikki Howard's bedroom, she careened straight

at me, like a fuzzy white bulet with a pink loling tongue.

'Sorry,' Lulu caled from the kitchen as she saw me scoop up the excited little dog. 'I had

her locked up in my room and I forgot to let her out until just now. God, look how glad she is

to see you! Even if you can't remember us, you have to remember Cosabela. I mean, you

named her after your favourite line of lingerie!'

Except, of course, that I don't have a favourite line of lingerie. Except maybe Hanes.

Stil, even if I didn't know Cosabela, Cosabela knew me. As soon as I sat down again on

the comfy white sofa I'd vacated a few minutes earlier, Cosabela leaped up and, tiny stump of

a tail wagging, promptly stood on her hind legs to give my face a thorough licking.

And I didn't mind. I realy didn't. Because after the shock I'd had, a face-licking actualy
felt pretty good.

'OK,' Brandon said, lowering himself on to the couch opposite mine and studying me with

a worried expression on his face. But not, I soon realized, because he was trying to figure out

how to get me to kiss him again. Unfortunately. 'It's time to stop messing around. Who did this

to you, Nikki? And be honest. Was it Al-Qaeda?'

'Brandon!' Lulu shrieked from the kitchen.

'Wel,' Brandon shook his head, 'if they want to strike a blow against freedom, why not go

after the Face of Stark, one of America's most beloved models?'

'Al-Qaeda doesn't know how to give people AMNESIA,' Lulu declared from behind the

black granite-topped island. 'Only the Scientologists have the technology to do that.'

Brandon looked at me gravely. 'Was it the Scientologists, Nikki?' he asked.

'OK,' I said. I'd reached up to rub my temples - I mean, Nikki Howard's temples. But

apparently, they were mine now. 'We need to get one thing straight right now. I know I look

like Nikki Howard. And I know I sound like Nikki Howard. I realize that right now, I am in

Nikki Howard's loft and wearing her clothes, while her dog is licking my face. But I am not

Nikki Howard. OK?"
'OK,' Brandon said. 'Except . . . you are.'

'I'm not,' I insisted. 'Look, I don't know what's going on any more than you two seem to.

But seriously, I'm not Nikki.'

'But how is that even possible?' Lulu wanted to know. She came around the kitchen island

. . . and I noticed what she was carrying - food. Lots of food.

And that the smell coming from the food was sublime.

Which didn't make any sense, because when I saw what the food was - after she'd put it

down on the white marble-topped coffee table in front of me - I could see it wasn't anything

I'd ever get excited over . . . in the past anyway. Just the promised blackened sea bass -

which, being fish, I shouldn't like. A bowl of soup - it looked like warmed-up leftover miso,

judging by the bits of tofu and seaweed floating in it, and which, again, yuck. I completely hate

tofu, let alone seaweed. Al this was accompanied by a cup of green tea.

I totally hate green tea.

But apparently Nikki Howard doesn't, because the next thing I knew, I was gulping that

tea down. And a second after that, I'd started in on the sea bass

and the miso soup.
And all of it was the most delicious food I can ever remember eating.

Don't think Lulu and Brandon didn't notice, either. They looked at how I was stuffing my

face, and Lulu went, almost admiringly, 'The blackened sea bass from Nobu always was your

favourite.'

That was enough to make me put my fork down. Although of course the truth was that by

then the fish was all gone anyway. And I'd put a pretty good dent in the soup too.

'You guys,' I said. 'Come on. Obviously I'm not Nikki Howard. I mean, I didn't even

know who you two were at first. I've seen you in magazines and all, but . . . I don't know

anything about you.'

Brandon looked sadly at Lulu. 'She pushed me away when I kissed her.'

Lulu threw me a shocked look. 'Nikki! Way to be a bitch!'

I felt myself blushing to my hairline. If only they knew the truth, that pushing him away was

the last thing I'd wanted to do . . .

'But that's what I'm trying to tell you!' I cried. 'I'm not Nikki Howard! I'm Emerson Watts

- honest, I really am.'

'I know, Nikki,' Lulu said, laying a sympathetic hand on my arm. 'That's why we're staging

this intervention. To help you remember who you really are - which isn't this
Emerson Watts

person. Look -' she bent over and puled a black portfolio out from beneath the couch - 'I

have your book. I know this wil spark some memories.'

She turned it to the first page, where there was a tearsheet from a magazine ad featuring

Nikki Howard in a poofy prom dress jumping into the air from a trampoline. 'This is from your

first ever shoot for Stark Enterprises, when you were just starting out. Remember? This was

before we met, when Rebecca first brought you to New York. You remember Rebecca,

right? Your agent?' When I looked at her blankly, she prodded, 'You must remember getting

signed by Ford. They said you were the most professional fifteen-year-old they'd ever

represented. They said you were way more mature than most of their twenty-year-old

models.'

'Uh,' I said. 'I told you. I'm not Nikki. I'm Emerson Watts-

'Emerson Watts.' Brandon's eyebrows were knitted. He was concentrating . . . which you

could tel for him wasn't al that easy. 'Emerson Watts. Why does that name sound so familiar
to me?'

'Shh,' Lulu said to him. 'Don't confuse her.' She turned a page in the portfolio.
'Look,

Nikki. Look at this. This is from your first runway show with Chanel. Remember, I was sitting

in the front row? And at the party afterwards I asked you if those lace-up gladiator stilettos

hurt, and you said they hurt like a mo-'

'Emerson Watts,' Brandon said again. Now his expression suggested that he was in pain.

But only from concentrating so hard. 'Seriously I've heard that name before . . .' 

'Ignore him,' Lulu said to me, and turned the page. 'He's just tired. He was up all night last

night dancing at Cave. Oh, look! Here's your first Victoria's Secret spread!' 

I stared down at the pictures, holding Cosabela close (she didn't seem at all inclined to

leave my lap. Ever. Which I didn't mind. I liked the way her fluttering little heartbeat felt against

my thighs. Or, er, Nikki Howard's thighs. There was something comforting about this little

creature that seemed to absolutely adore me. Who cared if who she really adored was Nikki

Howard?).

Looking at the pictures, I recognized the body I'd just seen in the bathroom mirror a little

while ago. In the air-brushed ad for lingerie, that body looked even more perfect than it had in

the mirror.
It seemed weird to me that, if Lulu Colins was really trying to jog my memory, she'd show me Nikki Howard's portfolio, and not a family album.

But of course, given the context - that I was apparently a normal eleventh-grader trapped in the body of one of the world's most famous supermodels - maybe it wasn't that weird after all. Maybe, under the circumstances, hoping to make me remember who I really was by showing me pictures of myself in a diamond-encrusted bra wasn't the worst strategy.

'Oh,' Lulu said, turning the page. 'Here's your first print ad for your new clothing line! See how pretty you look there? Your eyes are the same colour as those sapphires... That's not even photoshopped, you know. Your eyes really are that colour -'

'I know!' Brandon cried suddenly, startling us both - and Cosabela, who lifted her little head from my knee and cocked it at him inquisitively. 'Emerson Watts! That was the girl who got hit by the plasma screen at the grand opening of my dad's new store in SoHo.'

I blinked. The words plasma and screen triggered something deep within the recesses of my mind. Dimly - like a dream I'd had long ago - the memory of the day Christopher and I had
taken Frida to the grand opening of the Stark Megastore came back to me . . . just a trickle at

first . . . then a flood.

'Yes!' I cried, clapping my hands and startling Cosabella a little. 'Yes! That was me! I'm

Emerson Watts! I was there that day!'

'So was I!' Lulu squeaked, her dark eyes widening. 'Oh my God! That was so horrible!

Nikki, do you remember now? You fainted!'

'I'm not Nikki,' I reminded her. 'I'm Emerson Watts. I'm the one who got hit by the plasma

screen.'

'And, Nikki, you like totally passed out,' Lulu said, ignoring me. 'And that Gabriel Luna
guy ran over and he totally like cradled you in his arms, but he couldn't wake you up. No one
could. And the paramedics came and . . .' Lulu swung her head around to stare at me
accusingly. And that's the last time I saw you! Kely said you'd been diagnosed with

hypoglycaemia, and were taking some time off to try to get it under control. But I knew that

wasn't true. I mean, for one thing, you'd never said anything to me about having

hypoglycaemia. Acid reflux, maybe. But not hypoglycaemia. And also because no way would

you take time off without telling me where you were going. And no way would
you leave Cosy behind.'

I looked down at the little dog on my lap. No. There was no way anyone would leave Cosy behind.

Not if she'd had a choice.

And no way would you not call me,' Brandon added. And when I glanced at him, I saw that he was looking at me in a way that . . . well, no guy had ever looked at me before.

Except possibly for Gabriel Luna, that night in the hospital.

Only-I realized with a sudden pang of disappointment - it hadn't been ME Gabriel had been looking at like that at all.

It had been Nikki Howard. Nikki Howard, whom he'd supposedly cradled in his arms after she'd passed out at the Stark Megastore grand opening, then later visited in her hospital room.

Of course! How could I have been so stupid? How could I ever have thought Gabriel Luna would bring me flowers? Page 48 Meg Cabot: Airhead Those flowers hadn't been for me.

They'd been for Nikki Howard.
God. How naive could a person be? What guy would ever look at a girl like me - a normal girl - when a girl like Nikki Howard was around? Even Christopher hadn't been able to take his eyes off her the whole time she'd been within sight range, back at the Stark Megastore.

And Christopher isn't the type to fall for a pretty face. I mean, Christopher has always laughed at Whitney and the other Walking Dead at TAHS.

But I remembered now, the way his gaze had been glued to Nikki Howard's chest that day.

That chest was mine now . . . at least for the foreseeable future.

What did that mean? I mean, as far as my relationship with Christopher went?

The thought made my new chest feel a little tight.

Then I remembered something: Christopher had said I looked fine at the Stark Megastore grand opening. But that was back when I'd stil been me, Em Watts. Would he stil think I looked fine as Nikki Howard?

Somehow, I sort of doubted it.

'So I started looking for you,' Lulu went on. 'First I checked all the usual places you might go to get away from it all - Bali, Mustique, Eleuthera - but there was no record of you there
under any of the fake names you usually use to register-

'And that's when she asked for my help,' Brandon said. 'And so I talked to my
dad.

Because, you know, if anyone was going to know where you were, it'd be my
dad. But he

was al freaky about it-

'Right,' Lulu said, looking indignant. 'He told Brandon you were al right, but that you were

working through some things. Which, you know, I knew right away was total B. S. Because

no way you'd work through anything without asking for my help. I always help
you work

through things. Like that time Henry put the cafe-au-lait lowlights in your hair,
remember? So

then I thought maybe they'd stuck you in a Promises somewhere - just for a rest,
you know,

because I know you'd never be there for drugs, because I know you'd never mess
up your

body by doing them, and so that the press couldn't find you-

'- but you weren't registered at any of them, so finally I snuck into my dad's
office,'

Brandon said, 'and I looked through his stuff and I found your file and I saw that you were

right here in the city, at Manhattan General on Sixteenth Street-

'You were literally just down the street!' Lulu cried. 'The whole time! So I went to scout it
out,' Lulu explained. 'Because Brandon-

Brandon looked sheepish. 'I thought you might not be so happy to see me. About the

Mischa thing, I mean. But honest, Nik, I thought you were mad at me, and that's why you

hadn't caled. And the thing with Mischa, I mean, whatever, she just won't stop caling me, she

wants to cut an album, and you know I'm producing now-

'But then when you didn't remember me,' Lulu went on, after flashing him a glance filed

with annoyance, 'that's when I knew. That they'd gotten to you.'

It was hard to take in, this not-very-lucid explanation of what had gone on, from their point

of view, from the last time I remembered being myself - the day of the Stark Megastore grand

opening - until now.

But one thing was apparent. Something very, very weird had taken place that day.

'Wait!' Lulu cried. 'I figured it out.'

Both Brandon and I looked at her. 'Figured Page 49 Meg Cabot: Airhead out what?' I

asked.

'How come you look like Nikki,' Lulu explained, 'but you think you're this Emerson Watts

person. God, it's so obvious! You've had a spirit transfer!' she cried. 'Like in that
movie Freaky Friday!

Now it was my turn to blink. 'Uh, Lulu,' I said. Seriously. It is a crime that girls like my

sister worship people like Lulu. Yeah, she's good looking, and she's rich. And maybe - just

maybe - she means wel.

But she's got the brains of a clam.

'There's no such thing as a spirit transfer,' I informed her.

'Of course there is!' Lulu cried excitedly. 'Why have there been al those movies about it if

there isn't?'

'Lulu,' I said. How was I going to sum up quantum physics - let alone biology - for this girl

who so clearly had dropped out of school after approximately the eighth grade, if not earlier?

'What you're describing . . . that doesn't happen. OK?'

'But what other explanation is there?' Lulu asked me, her brown eyes wide and innocent.

'Obviously, when that girl was hit by the plasma screen, and you - I mean, Nikki - fainted, you

two swapped spirits. Al we have to do now is find this Emerson Watts person - who has

Nikki's spirit trapped inside her - and you two can swap back and be normal again.'

Brandon was frowning. 'Except-'
'No except,' Lulu said stubbornly. 'That's how it works. I mean, maybe, since you two
both passed out at the same time and that's how your spirits got swapped, we'll have to hit you
both over the head to make it happen again. But we'll be careful not to do any permanent
damage. Also not to bruise you, because you have the spring shows in Milan coming up-'

'We can't,' Brandon said, before I could interrupt.

'What do you mean, we can't?' Lulu demanded. 'Of course we can. Why do you always
have to be so negative, Brandon? It's because you spend too much time with Mischa, and
she's stil bummed out about her last pilot not getting picked up-

'No,' Brandon said. 'I'm not being negative. I mean you can't do the spirit transfer thing.'

'Why?' Lulu snapped, looking angry. Only, because she was so tiny and pretty, it was kind
of hard to take her anger seriously It was like seeing a chihuahua growling. 'If we need a spirit
guide or whatever, I can totaly ask Yoshi from my yoga class. He's way spiritual.'

'It's not that,' Brandon said. He looked super uncomfortable. 'It's just that . . . when I was

going through my dad's files, looking for information about Nikki, I saw something. Something
about that Emerson Watts girl.'

I leaned forward in my seat - even though it wasn't easy, since the couch was so soft it

kind of enveloped you.

'What about me?' I asked.

'Wel,' Brandon said hesitantly. 'It's just that, according to this report my dad had, when

that TV fel on Emerson Watts, she - I mean, you - died.'

Airhead
Ten

'No,' I said, horrified, shaking my head. 'That's not possible.'

Brandon looked like he felt sorry for me.

'I'm just teling you what I read,' he said. 'Dad seemed pretty upset by the whole thing. I mean, even though those EGG people did it-

'Egg? You must mean ELF,' I corrected him.

'Whatever,' Brandon said. 'It was stil his fault. Dad's, I mean. He should have had better

security.'

'He should have made sure those plasma screens were better secured to the ceiling,' Lulu said gravely.

'Wel,' Brandon said, looking uncomfortable. 'It was secured. Secure enough that it wouldn't have falen down if someone hadn't shot it with a paintbal-

'I don't believe you,' I said, cutting him off.

He shook his head. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but it's true. If anyone's to blame, it's those elf

people-

'Not about the plasma screen,' I said, getting up from the couch . . . but stil clutching Cosy

to me. 'About me. Being dead. I can't be dead.'
'Oh, believe me,' Brandon said. 'Emerson Watts? She's dead. It was in the paper and on CNN and everything. I even saw the obituary. It was in the file in my dad's office with the rest of the stuff.'

It felt as if something moved over me. Nothing too massive. Just a steamroller.

Lulu, who'd been biting her lower lip, released it and said, 'I'm sorry, Nik. But I think Brandon's right. I saw the way that thing landed on the girl, and she . . . wel, I don't see how anyone could have survived that. It squashed her. Like a bug.'

'If I'm dead,' I demanded when the steamroller finally moved off me and I was able to speak, and also pace the length of the loft, which I promptly began to do, 'how can I be here?

How can I be talking to you? How can I just have eaten that blackened sea bass?'

'Because,' Lulu said patiently. 'I already told you. You had a spirit transfer-'

'Oh my God!' I yeled. 'For the last time! There's no such thing as a spirit transfer!'

'God, OK,' Lulu said, blinking rapidly. 'You don't have to yel.'

'There's got to be some other explanation,' I said, stil pacing. 'I mean, if Emerson Watts is dead, and I'm Nikki Howard, why are Emerson Watts's parents the ones who've been at my
bedside al along in the hospital? Why haven't Nikki's parents been there?

'Wel, because Nikki doesn't have any parents,' Lulu said matter-of-factly. 'I mean, she
became an emancipated minor the minute she landed her first modeling contract.'

I quit pacing and stared at her. 'What are you talking about?'

'Nikki never got along with her parents,' Lulu said. 'You know you never - I mean, she never - talked about them Page 51 Meg Cabot: Airhead much.'

'Try at al,' Brandon said drily.

'Right,' Lulu said. 'Nikki didn't have any family. I mean, none that she spoke to. Or about.

I think -' Lulu dropped her voice to a whisper - 'I think Nikki's parents were poor. Like

trailer-park poor.'

'Why are you whispering?' I asked her.

'Wel,' Lulu shrugged, 'I don't know. I mean . . . I guess because . . . Wel, it's not very
classy to talk about money. And Nikki never mentioned her family, or where she
grew up, or

anything that happened before she came to New York and made it big.'

'Fine,' I said, beginning to pace again. 'That stil doesn't explain what my parents are doing

in Nikki Howard's hospital room.'

'Because they know that's where your spirit is,' Lulu explained patiently. 'Maybe her body
is dead, Brandon. But her spirit is still alive. Which, of course, leads us to the real question:

where is Nikki Howard's spirit? Is it just floating around out there? If so, we need
to capture it!

'What we need to do,' Brandon said, completely ignoring Lulu, 'is call Kely and tell her we
have Nikki here in the loft. But that Nikki doesn't know she's Nikki. Then we need to ask
Kely where the REAL Nikki is. Nikki's spirit, I mean.'

I looked back and forth between the two of them. And wondered if I could possibly have
been kidnapped by two stupider people.

'Do you think Kely did this?' Lulu asked. 'I've always thought there was something wrong
with her. I mean, what kind of publicist is she, when she can't even get Nikki on the cover of
the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue, right? She keeps saying there's plenty of time and that
Nikki shouldn't worry. But what kind of lame answer is that? I'll bet you anything Kely is
behind this whole spirit-transfer thing . . .'

Only I didn't hear how Brandon replied. Because I had reached up to scratch my head
and felt something.

Something that wasn't just hair and smooth scalp.
I stopped pacing and stood there in front of one of Nikki Howard's floor-to-ceiling windows, staring unseeingly at my own reflection - or Nikki Howard's reflection - and the bright lights of downtown Manhattan beyond it as I felt along my head. Something wasn't right.

Something . . .

And there it was. All along the base of my - or Nikki's - skull. A puckered line of skin, hidden by long blonde hair. It didn't hurt, but it was still tender. Something horrible had happened there. Something that had left a hideous raised scar, about half an inch wide and five or six inches long.

The thing is, I knew what it was. I knew exactly what it was, from all the plastic-surgery shows Christopher and I liked to watch on the Discovery Health Channel. Someone had made an incision at the back of Nikki's neck, then peeled her skin back, hair and all, until the gleaming white bones of her skull had been revealed.

Only why? Why would someone have done something like that? Unless . . .

And then I remembered something that made my blood - Nikki’s blood - run cold. A rainy Sunday afternoon at the apartment Christopher shared with the Commander, a bag of Doritos
we'd smuggled in from Gristedes, and a surgery show:

BRAIN TRANSPLANTS: THE SURGERY OF THE FUTURE IS HERE NOW.

No. No way.

What had they said in that documentary? It was all coming back - brain transplants,

sounding like the stuff of science fiction.

But scientists in Europe had proved it was possible to transplant the brain as a separate
organ into an intact animal, and maintain it in a viable, or living, situation for many days.

'Sweet,' Christopher had said. 'I want one.'

The documentary had gone on to assert that it was only ethical considerations that were keeping the technology from moving forward. Bioethicists argued that it was immoral to

harvest a brain-dead body for the use of a living brain.

'Immoral my ass,' Christopher had said. 'They can transplant my brain into the Hulk's body any time they want.'

Christopher had been disappointed to learn that the technology for whole-body transplants - the correct term for brain transplants - in humans was far off.

But, as he pointed out, a generation ago, human cloning seemed an impossibility as well.

So how long would it be until whole-body transplants were as routine as heart
transplants?

Was that it? Was I the first ever recipient of a whole-body transplant? Had that plasma

screen crushed my body, but spared my brain? Had Dr Holcombe then removed my brain and

transplanted it into the nearest convenient brain-dead body on hand . . . the body of Nikki

Howard, who'd apparently suffered from some kind of colapse at or around the same time as

my accident?

No. No, that was ridiculous. First of al, it wasn't even possible. Hadn't the documentary

said scientists were stil years from being able to perform this type of surgery in humans?

And second of al . . . why would anyone use that kind of technology - if indeed it did exist

- to save me?

Suddenly some things that had only confused me before now were beginning to make

sense though. Frida's weird reaction to me - asking me if I was realy me. Of course she wasn't

sure if I was me . . . because I was Nikki Howard on the outside, not the sister she knew and

(alegedly) loved.

And what about Dr Holcombe's insistence that I not move or sit up? This would make
sense in a post-operative brain-surgery patient.

And his assertion that I'd made more progress than they could have hoped for? They'd

transplanted my BRAIN into someone else's body, and I was already speaking lucidly and

(somewhat) in control of my motor functions (although, of course, my surgery had been over a

month ago).

And what about the fact that I was the only patient I had seen on the entire floor as Lulu

and Brandon had been wheeling me out? Obviously they wanted to keep the whole thing top

secret. Why? Because of what the documentary had mentioned, about the ethical controversy

over such a procedure?

And what about the fact that suddenly I liked fish?

Or the fact that I, Emerson Watts, was looking out of Nikki Howard's sapphire blue eyes,

instead of my own muddy brown ones?

My God. It al made sense. I hadn't had a spirit transfer, as Lulu Colins kept insisting. Dr

Holcombe had sawed open Nikki Howard's cranium, removed her brain and slid mine in

where hers had been, carefully attaching all the appropriate nerves and arteries and veins,

before fusing her skull and finally stitching her skin and hair back into place.
The realization caused my knees to buckle. Page 53 Meg Cabot: Airhead Next
ting I knew I was sprawled out on the white carpet, looking up at Lulu and Brandon's
expressions . . . and being licked in the face by Nikki Howard's dog.

'Nikki?' Lulu was crying. 'Nikki, can you hear me? Oh, Brandon, this is all our
fault.

Maybe we shouldn't have taken her from the hospital. Maybe she really is sick!' 

'Nikki?' Brandon was giving my face little smacks. 'Nikki!' 

'Ow,' I said irritably. 'Stop hitting me.'

'Oh.' Brandon lowered his hand. 'You scared us. Are you all right?'

'I'm fine,' I said. 'Help me over to the couch.'

Brandon pulled me up, and then chivalrously carried me over to the couch. Once I was
settle(d on to it, Cosabela came running over to jump in my lap and gave me a
few more
restorative kisses.

'What happened to you?' Lulu wanted to know. 'Was it hypoglycaemia? Do you
have low
blood sugar? Do you want some TaB energy drink or something? Brandon, go
pour her a
TaB.'

'No,' I said weakly, refraining from pointing out to her that TaB is sugar free, not really
useful for hypoglycaemics. 'I'm fine. Really.'
Lulu shook her head. 'Do it anyway, Brandon. Nikki - Em - whatever your name is. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. We never should have . . . we were only trying to help. What can we do? What can we do to make it up to you?'

'Nothing,' I said tiredly. Because that's all I felt. Not outrage over what had been done to me. Not anger. Not even wonder.

They'd done it. They had done it.

I was the world's first brain transplant . . .

'Oh, here,' Lulu said. She took the can of TaB Brandon had brought over, and waved it under my nose. 'I think you should drink this.'

The drink actually smelt great. Which made no sense, because it was diet. And I hate diet.

I reached up and took hold of the can, then took a sip. It was cold and sweet and delicious.

'Look, Nikki,' Lulu said. 'Or Em. Or whatever your name is. Do you want us to call someone? Your agent, Rebecca? Or your publicist, Kely? Should we call Kely and see if she can tell us what's going on?'

'Don't call anyone yet,' I said. I wasn't ready to go back to the hospital. Not now. Not knowing what I suddenly knew. Or was fairly certain I knew.
Why hadn't they told me? What had they been waiting for?

'I'm really tired,' I said, handing Lulu the empty can, which I'd drained. 'Can I just hang out here, and maybe rest a little before I decide what to do next?'

'Of course you can,' Lulu exclaimed. 'I mean, this is your loft. I'm the one who pays you rent.'

'Nikki Howard,' I corrected her. 'You paid Nikki Howard rent.'

I was the world's first brain transplant . . .

. . . and the body they'd chosen to transplant my brain into was one of the planet's most famous supermodels.

Seriously. The Hulk would have been better.

**Airhead**
Eleven

I woke to the sound of a buzzer.

At first I couldn't figure out where the sound was coming from. That's because, for a minute or so, I thought I was in my own room. I reached out, fumbling for my alarm clock. But instead of my fingers coming into contact with hard plastic, al I felt was warm skin.

This was unusual, to say the least.

What was even more unusual was that when I opened my eyes, I saw I wasn't in my room at al. Or even in the last place I remembered waking up, the hospital. No, I was in Nikki Howard's downtown loft, where I'd apparently fallen asleep on the living room couch - with my head on Brandon Stark's chest, no less.

When I jerked myself to an upright position - completely startled by the intimate way in which I'd curled myself up to a complete and utter stranger - I got a head rush. Not just a head rush, but a headache.

It only took a second or two to remember why.

And when I did, I groaned and dropped my face to my knees, Nikki Howard's long
blonde hair falling all around me like a tent. Cosy - Nikki Howard's dog - didn't seem to like
that very much. She wiggled her way past my hair and on to my lap so she could give me a
good-morning lick.

Then the buzzer went off again.

'Oh God,' I groaned, and, lifting Cosabela, I staggered across the living room, looking for
the source of the sound so I could make it stop.

It was morning. The sky outside the floor-to-ceiling windows was already a bright
autumnal blue.

But that didn't seem to trouble the two FONs who'd fallen asleep beside me and who
continued to doze undisturbed. Lulu Colins looked like a little angel, with her pageboy al
messed up and her mascara smudged.

And Brandon Stark, at six and a half feet of him, lay half on and half off the couch, snoring
lightly, the television remote in his hand. On the screen over the fireplace flickered soundless
images of famous faces. It was MTV, on mute.

The buzzer sounded again and Lulu, over on the couch, groaned and pulled the cashmere
blanket we'd all been sharing over her head. I realized the sound was coming from some sort
of intercom located to one side of the door to the elevator. Not knowing what else to do - but
desperate to make the sound stop - I lifted the handset that was connected to the wall where
the buzzing seemed to be coming from.
'Helo?' I croaked into the handset.
'Sorry to wake you, Miss Howard,' said a man's voice I didn't recognize (of course), 'but
Mr Justin Bay is here, and he's asking to see you.'
Justin Bay? The star of the Journeyquest movie (which blew)? Justin Bay wanted to
see me?
Then I remembered. He wasn't there to see me at all. He was there to see Nikki Howard.
But wait. Why? Wasn't he Lulu Colins's boyfriend? I remembered the pink sapphire she'd
shown me that time she'd visited me in the hospital, when I'd hoped she'd been a hallucination.
Hadn't she said that 'Justin' had given it to her?
Yes. Yes, that's exactly what she'd said.
'He must mean Lulu,' I said. 'But she's asleep-'
'No, Miss Howard,' the doorman - because that's who it had to be, right? - said. 'Mr Bay
says to tel you he's here specificaly to see you, and that he'd appreciate it if you wouldn't tel
Miss Colins, and if you'd come down to meet him. He says it's important.'

I stood there staring at the intercom in confusion. Justin Bay wanted to see Nikki Howard,

but he didn't want her to tel Lulu. What was going on here?

'He also says,' the doorman went on in a slightly bored voice, 'that he's not leaving until

you see him, and that this time he really means it.'

Whoa! I stared at the intercom some more. Why did Justin Bay need to see Nikki Howard so badly, but didn't want Lulu to know? I tried to remember what I knew about Justin Bay, which - beyond what I'd read in the pages of Frida's Us Weekly and that he'd been horrible in the Journeyquest movie as Leander - wasn't much, except that he was incredibly good-looking.

Oh, and rich. Because his dad, Richard Bay, had also been an actor, star of the mega-

successful Sky Warrior franchise when he was younger. Now he produced heartwarming

family friendly television shows on prime time and raised buffalo (why did Frida keep leaving

her celebrity gossip magazines lying around for me to find? Worse, why was I always picking

them up and reading them?) on a huge ranch in Montana.

Maybe Justin had a surprise for Lulu. Sure, that had to be why he wanted to see Nikki.
and not her. Right?

'Do you want me to call the police, Miss Howard?' was the doorman's next surprising question.

'What?' I squawked in astonishment into the intercom's handset. 'No! No, that's OK. I'll be right down.'

'Sure thing, Miss Howard,' the doorman said. 'I'll send the elevator up for you.'

I hung up the handset. OK. Great. I was going to have to talk to Justin Bay. As Nikki Howard though, not as me, because I couldn't tell him I wasn't Nikki. It had been hard enough to convince Lulu and Brandon that I wasn't Nikki Howard. Forget Justin Bay. His portrayal as Leander in the Journeyquest movie had pretty much proven he was the dumbest guy on earth.

.

Fine. I could do this. I could -

Oh God. I couldn't do this. I didn't have time for this. I had to get back to the hospital. I knew now that I had had a good night's sleep (even if it had been on a couch, in front of Lulu's demo for her new rock video - she was cutting her first album. Her singing voice wasn't that bad actually) that I had to find out what was going on, how my parents could have done this to
me, why no one had even told me what was going on, what had happened to my old body . . .

. . . and Nikki Howard's brain.

I put Cosabela down and darted into Nikki Howard's bathroom. Yeah. Nikki's face was stil the one that looked back at me in the mirror. No chance that any of this had turned out to be some kind of bizarre nightmare.

I splashed some cold water on to it to wash the sleep away, then puled open a drawer in the hopes of finding a brush, found one and dragged it through my hair - carefully, so as not to hurt the tender sutures at the back of my head. I mean, Nikki's head - then puled a toothbrush from the gold cup by the sink. It was Nikki Howard's toothbrush, but I used it anyway.

Because, whatever - my teeth are Nikki Howard's teeth now. Right?

I rinsed and wiped my mouth, then grabbed the first jacket my hands came into contact with - something made out of buttery soft brown suede.

I was about to walk out of Nikki's room, when it hit me that I'd almost walked by her computer without checking it to confirm whether what Brandon had said last night was true. I mean, about me being dead. Sure, Justin was waiting - but Googling myself would only take a
second.

And besides, if I'd really been in a coma for a month, I probably had a ton of emails. Sure,

most of them would be spam, but it would only take a minute to check them and see if maybe

Christopher had written . . .

But when I opened Nikki's pink laptop, I saw right away something wasn't right. It wasn't

just that it was a Stark-brand PC, which frankly wasn't what I'd buy if I was a millionaire

supermodel with all the money in the world.

It was that the keyboard was sluggish, not responding to my commands quite as soon as it

ought to have.

It only took a second for me see why. Every time I pressed a letter on the keyboard, the

network activity light on Nikki's modem flashed.

Which meant, I knew perfectly well from Christopher's father's obsessive belief that all our

computers were being monitored by the government, that someone was tracking Nikki

Howard's keystrokes.

Her computer - unlike the Commander's - was totally being spied on.

Someone who didn't spend much time on computers - like, say, a world-famous supermodel - wouldn't have noticed. But to someone who basically lived on one,
like me, it

was totally obvious.

And deeply, deeply sinister.

I puled my fingers off the keyboard so fast it was like I'd been stung. I hadn't clicked on

anything except Google News. I hadn't typed in my name or anything else that could have

given me away.

Stil. Talk about creepy. Who'd be spying on Nikki Howard?

And why? How interesting could a supermodel's emails be anyway?

Just then I heard the elevator doors open, and I darted from Nikki's room. The elevator

operator - a different one from last night - grinned at me and said, 'Good morning, Miss

Howard.'

'Shh,' I said, and pointed at the sleeping Lulu and Brandon. They looked so angelic. No

way would you guess they were a couple of lunatics who might kidnap someone in the hopes

of curing her of brainwashing by 'Scientologists'.

'Oh, sorry' the elevator operator whispered. He held the door open for me. 'Going down?'

'Yeah,' I said, with one last and final look at my 'captors'. And I stepped into the elevator.

...
... just as a tiny white blur whizzed past me and into the car.

'Cosy,' I hissed at Nikki Howard's dog, who'd plopped down on to the elevator floor as if

she owned it. 'Get out. You don't really belong to me. I'm not coming back. Go home.'

But Cosabela only whined softly.

'Seriously,' I whispered. 'You can't come. I'm going back to the hospital' I scooped the

tiny dog up and plopped her down on to the white carpeting just outside the elevator door,

where I commanded her to 'Stay'.

But one look at that sad, furry little face - not to mention hearing her pathetic whine - and

my heart melted.

'Oh,' I said, realizing her desire to go with me might actually have nothing to do with her

love for me and more to do with a call from nature. 'Sorry Come on then.'

And the dog leaped excitedly into the elevator after me, her stumpy tail wagging like a . . .

well, I don't even know what. Thing that wags a lot.

The elevator operator smiled at me (well, at Nikki Howard) and closed the door. Then we

glided down to the lobby, where he slid the door open again and said, 'Have a nice day, Miss

Howard.'
'I'm not -' I began. But then I caught a glimpse of my reflection in one of the lobby's mirrored walls. And I realized the futility of it all.

'Thanks,' I said instead. And stepped out of the elevator, with Cosabela at my heels.

The strangest thing of all? Even though all I'd done was wash her face and brush her teeth,

Nikki Howard still looked gorgeous. Gorgeous enough, anyway, that the UPS guy delivering packages to the mail room dropped his electronic clipboard thingy when he saw me . . . then

picked it up, all flustered.

Either that, or he was just freaked out to see a celebrity of my magnitude in jeans and Skechers.

Somehow I suspect it was the aforementioned gorgeousness.

Which might sound like it's cool. I mean, being so gorgeous that you stop UPS drivers in their tracks.

But when it's just something you were transplanted into? It isn't really all that much of an accomplishment.

I hadn't really had a chance to notice the night before - having been in the middle of being kidnapped and realizing I was trapped inside someone else's body and all - but the lobby of
Nikki's building was huge, with a gigantic crystal chandelier hanging in the middle of the ceiling.

Standing directly beneath that chandelier was Justin Bay, looking as if he'd just stepped out from between the pages of one of my sister's teen magazines. He was dressed casually in jeans, a grey V-necked sweater - and a brown leather jacket. When he saw me coming towards him, his darkly good-looking face twitched, and his gaze darted nervously past my shoulder as if to see if anyone else was getting out of the elevator with me. When he saw it was just me though, he seemed to visibly relax. He even broke into a grin that showed all his white, impossibly even teeth.

'You came,' he said, in that voice I recognized from the awful Journeyquest movie, as I approached him.

'Uh,' I said. Cosabela had pranced away from me, heading straight towards the revolving doors outside. 'Yeah . . . but I can only stay a minute. I have to go. Was there something you wanted me to give Lulu?'

Justin's grin vanished. 'Lulu?' His handsome face looked perplexed. 'Why would I want you to give something to Lulu?'

'Um, I don't know,' I said. Cosabela was standing on her hind legs, dancing
around in

front of the revolving doors. I'd been right. She really needed to go. 'I just figured that's why

you wanted to see me and not her. I thought you had a surprise for her or something.'

'What is this, a joke?' Justin reached out and grabbed one of my hands. And he wasn't

exactly shaking it. He clung to it, while gazing down meaningfully into my eyes with his own

pleading and half-filed with tears - just like that scene in Journeyquest the movie when his

character Leander pleaded with the evil sorceress not to kill his beloved Alana (played by

Mischa Barton). 'Nikki, where have you been, baby? I've been dying. You haven't returned

any of my calls or text messages. It's been more than a month. Then I hear you're finally back,

and you don't even call. What did I do wrong? Just tell me.'

As I stared at him in growing horror as his words sunk in, I became aware of three things

at once. One, Justin Bay was in love with me. Well, not with me, but with Nikki Howard.

Two, Nikki Howard was apparently a total skank who was slutting around behind her

best friend and room-mate Lulu's back with her boyfriend, Justin. Not to mention behind the
back of Nikki's own boyfriend, Brandon.

And three, Nikki Howard's dog was about to pee on the marble floor of the lobby of her building.

'Could you just hold that thought?' I said to Justin, slipping my hand out from his. 'I just have to let my dog out.'

'Nikki,' Justin said, his face clouding over with frustration. 'You can't-

'Seriously,' I said. Just hold on a minute.'

I hurried away from him, and over to the revolving door.

'Here, Cosy,' I called to the dog. 'Here, girl -'

And the little dog darted after me as I pushed on the revolving door and went out into the cool autumn air. As soon as we got outside, Cosabela squatted next to one of the planters beside the building . . . and I realized she hadn't just needed to pee.

I also realized I had nothing to clean it up with.

'Oh my God. I'm so sorry,' I apologized to the doorman, who'd been standing a few yards away, flagging down a cab for another resident.

He looked at me with an expression of bewildered amusement.

'Miss Howard,' he said, 'I'll take care of it, like always.'

Oh my God. Nikki Howard's doormen clean up after her dog for her? How totally
embarrassing. I could feel myself blushing. A detached part of me realized that it was

interesting that Nikki Howard blushed so easily.

But most of me just continued to be mortified. Also hideously uncomfortable, because of

what had just gone on back in the lobby.

'Realy, um,' I said. 'It's OK. If you just have a plastic bag, or something, I'll clean it up.'

'That's not necessary, Miss Howard,' the Page 59 Meg Cabot: Airhead doorman said,

now looking at me as if he thought I'd lost my mind. Apparently Nikki Howard never offered
to clean up after her own dog. 'It's me, Karl. I'll take care of it.'

I wanted to die. I said, 'Wel, OK, Karl. I'm realy sorry. Look, I hate to ask, but I, um,

have to go. Can you make sure Cosy gets back to the loft?' No way was I going back into

that lobby and facing Justin again.

Karl nodded and went to scoop up the little dog -

Who took one look at me and began to wail.

Not just whine. Not just bark. But howl. Like a tiny coyote. With a bouffant
hairdo.

What was her problem now?

Karl was al too happy to answer that question for me.

'She misses you,' Karl said al jovialy. But there was an undercurrent of
seriousness in his

voice. 'She did this the whole time you were gone last month.'

Oh my God. I was a horrible person. I had abandoned my dog for more than a month.

Then I remembered: she wasn't my dog.

And I wasn't a horrible person either. Karl didn't know that the reason Cosabela had

been abandoned was because her real owner was - I'm pretty sure - dead. Wel . . .
in a way.

Unless Lulu was right about the whole spirit-transfer thing. Which I was pretty sure she wasn't.

Because such a thing wasn't physically possibly.

'Cosy' I hurried back to the doorman and took the little dog from his hands. Instantly she

stopped crying and tried to bury herself inside my jacket.

'Cosy' I whispered to her, my heart melting all over again. 'I can't take you. You don't

really belong to me. And I'm going back to the hospital. They don't let dogs in the hospital.

Remember?'

But the dog just smiled up at me from inside my jacket, panting happily, her tail thumping

against me.

And I knew in that instant that I was taking Cosy with me, come hell or high water.
Whatever that expression meant.

Yeah. My life wasn't getting unduly complicated or anything.

It was kind of ironic that, just as I was thinking this, Justin Bay appeared, looking annoyed.

He strode over to me to take my arm.

'Is this about that ring?' he leaned down to ask me in a low voice. We were standing on

Center Street, a one-way street that was still busy enough that I could barely hear him above

the traffic noise. 'The one I gave Lulu? Because it didn't mean anything, baby. I only did it to

throw her off the scent, because she was getting suspicious about us. You can't honestly be

holding that ring against me-'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' I told him. Which was the truth. 'And I really

have to go now -'

His face twisted with emotion.

And the next thing I knew, he had hold of both my arms and was hauling me towards him

to lower his lips over mine.

My second kiss in the past twelve hours was even more devastating than the first one. I

could feel this one all the way down to my toes, which instantly curled inside my Skoehers.
I used to always snort derisively when I got to the parts in Frida's romance novels where

the dukes snatched up the poor but spunky heroines and moulded their bodies against the front

of their waistcoats or whatever. I always thought to myself, as the heroines' bodies went limp

in response, 'Yeah, right. Like thatever happens.'

Imagine my surprise when my own body - or, I guess I should say, Nikki Howard's body

- went limp in response to Justin Bay's kiss, right there on Center Street, in front of Karl the
doorman, a string of taxis waiting for the lights to turn, a million pigeons and everyone else who

might have been looking. I nearly dropped Cosabela - who was getting smushed between us

anyway - I was so shocked.

Was this normal? Was this how bodies were supposed to react when getting kissed -
especialy by guys who were practicaly strangers to me (aside from a passing familiarity due to

the pages of gossip magazines)? Or were Justin Bay and Brandon Stark just phenomenaly
good kissers? Because this kissing thing - seriously, I could totaly get into it. Kissing rocked. I

was loving the kissing thing. I mean, obviously it was wrong - so wrong - to be kissing Nikki
Howard's best friend's boyfriend behind her best friend's back and especially behind Nikki

Howard's boyfriend's back.

Not to mention the fact that, truthfully, I didn't even like either of these guys. I mean, I still

had a monster crush on my own best friend, back home. If he had been the one bending my

body back there on Center Street, I swear to God, there probably would have been an

explosion or something.

Which was why I knew I couldn't let this kissing business continue, however much Nikki's

body might have wanted it to. What if Christopher came strolling up (for whatever unlikely

reason) and saw me with Justin Bay's tongue rammed down my throat? He hates Justin Bay

for what he did to ruin the Journeyquest movie with his terrible acting.

And OK, he wouldn't necessarily know it was me and not Nikki Howard.

But that's beside the point.

And what about Lulu? Supposing Lulu woke up and looked out of the window and saw

us? True, Lulu had kidnapped me. But she had done it out of the goodness of her heart.

It was kind of hard to say anything though, with Justin's mouth on mine. Awesome as this

felt, it just couldn't go on. It took every ounce of determination I had to wrench
my lips from
his and say, 'Um, please stop-

'You know this is what you want,' Justin said in a thick voice - really! Just like the
dukes in
Frida's books! - keeping an iron grip on my arms.
The thing was, he was totally right. I did want it. Did I ever. But I wasn't going to be
boneheaded enough to say that.

'No,' I said weakly instead, 'I don't. It's wrong.'

'That's not what you said in Paris,' Justin reminded me.

'Um,' I said, keeping my still throbby mouth carefully averted from his in case he tried to
persuade me some more. 'I don't know. I've never been to Paris. Please let go -'

A second later, much to my surprise, he did let go. But not because I'd asked him to. He'd
let go because Gabriel Luna, of all people, appeared as if from nowhere and yanked him
forcefully off me.

'I believe the young lady asked you to release her,' Gabriel said to Justin in his crisp British
accent.

Whoa! This was getting more and more Page 61 Meg Cabot: Airhead like one of Frida's
romance novels every minute! In a totally excelent way.
'Who the hel,' Justin asked, checking his leather jacket for dents where Gabriel had

manhandled it, 'do you think you are?'

'A friend of Nikki's,' Gabriel said woodenly in response. An FON! Gabriel Luna

had just

called himself an FON.!

To me, Gabriel asked, in a much warmer, concerned tone, 'Are you al right, Nikki?'

I nodded, absently stroking Cosabela, who hadn't taken too kindly to being

squashed against me, and was growling at Justin with al the ferocity of a nine-pound

Rottweiler.

'I'm fine,' I said. 'Just worried about - you know. Who might have seen us.'

I meant Christopher - and Lulu - of course. But this caused Justin to look al

around quickly, as if realizing for the first time that we were actualy standing on a fairly

busy street

corner. Not once did he glance in the direction of the wide floor-to-ceiling

windows above us,

though. The cad! Or was scoundrel the right word? I'd have to check one of

Frida's books.

'That's right,' Gabriel said mildly, noticing Justin's sudden alarm. 'Paparazzi could show up

any minute. I thought I saw some around the corner actualy, on my way over.'

And that was al it took to cause Justin to say, 'I'll cal you later, babe,' to me before

flipping up the colar of his leather jacket and hurrying away.
I couldn't believe it! Lulu, his alleged girlfriend, he didn't give a second thought to. But paparazzi scared him so badly he took off like a shot! What a jerk. Or rake. Or whatever.

Gabriel looked at me and asked, 'Are you really all right, Nikki?'

I blinked at him . . . then glanced over at Karl, who was staring at both of us with his mouth hanging open a little, his fingers on his cellphone, as if he'd just been about to call nine-one-one. Noticing the direction of my stare, he hastily tucked the phone away.

'I'm fine,' I said to Gabriel. 'Really I just . . . I need to go. Back to the hospital. I . . . I wasn't supposed to be let out this early and . . . I just need to get back.'

'I know,' Gabriel said in the same calm voice in which he mentioned the paparazzi. 'I've just come from there. I stopped by to see how you were doing, and I found the place in an uproar because you were gone. Snuck out for a bit of fun last night, did you?'

I stared at him, not understanding what he meant at first. Snuck out for a bit of fun? No, actualy, I was kidnapped by two FFBFs dressed as surgeons.

But then I realized what he must have walked up and seen - me in front of my (wel, Nikki Howard's) apartment building making out with Justin Bay - and how that had to have looked.

And I felt myself blush to my hairline.
'N-no,' I stammered. 'No, it wasn't like that! Not at al. There was a misunderstanding. It was Lulu! Lulu Collins and Brandon Stark -'

I broke off. I could tel by his expression that I was only making things worse.

'Look, I just need to get back,' I said, unable to meet his gaze, I was so mortified. 'I'l . . .

I'll see you later.'

And I turned, Cosabela stil in my arms, Page 62 Meg Cabot: Airhead and headed for Center Street.

His voice stopped me before I'd gone a single step.

'I wouldn't bother. There are no taxis.'

'Hardly ever are, this time of day,' Karl, who appeared to be an unapologetic eavesdropper, caled from over by the door. 'Everyone's heading uptown to work. Give it an hour.'

An hour! I didn't have an hour! I had to get back to the hospital! Especially if what Gabriel had said was true, and the place was 'in an uproar'. Why had I stopped to check my email upstairs on Nikki's completely compromised computer? I should have looked for a cellphone so I could caI my parents and tel them not to worry. Maybe Karl would let me borrow his . .

. oh, whatever, I just needed to get uptown . .
'That's OK,' I said in a voice gone suddenly shaky. 'I'll just take the subway.'

'You can't take the subway,' Gabriel said simply.

'It'll be fine,' I said, turning to head in the opposite direction, towards Broome Street. This

was my neighbourhood, after all. I knew exactly where I was. I didn't really think it was going

to be fine, but what else could I do? 'I can just grab the Six over by Bleecker and take it to

Fourteenth Street and walk the rest of the way. It's not far.'

Then, as I reached into my pocket for my wallet and MetroCard, I realized it wasn't

actually my pocket at all, but Nikki Howard's pocket.

And it was empty.

'Oh no,' I said with a groan. I didn't have my wallet. Or my MetroCard. Great. Just great.

'It doesn't matter,' Gabriel said in the same calm voice. 'Because you can't take the

subway anyway.'

I started to say that of course I could - why couldn't I?

But no sooner was the first word out of my mouth than my arm was grabbed. Thinking it

was Justin Bay (again), I whipped around fast, expecting to have to fend off another knee-

melting French kiss.

But instead I saw a group of elementary school girls in plaid skirts and maroon
sweaters,

who at started screaming the minute they saw my face.

'I told you, Tiffany!' shrieked the one who had hold of my arm, an adorably freckled nine-

year-old in braids. 'It's her! See!'

And Braidy pointed past my face to a four-storey-high mural painted on the side of a

nearby building - a mural which just happened to be of Nikki Howard in a bikini, urging

viewers to come to the new Stark Megastore in SoHo.

'See? I told you! It's her!' Braidy screamed, practically yanking my arm out of its socket.

'Nikki, Nikki, can I have your autograph?'

'I want it too, Nikki!' Tiffany shrieked, shoving a pen and a French notebook in my face.

'Sign mine, oh, please!'

'I'm not Nikki,' I cried. I tried to get away from them without outright smacking any of

them. 'Seriously you guys, I'm not-'

'Girls!' A nearby nun, who was clearly supposed to be in control of the group, but who

had vastly underestimated the power of a supermodel over her young charges, caled vainly for

order. 'Stop this! Stop this at once! Leave the young lady alone!'

But they wouldn't leave me alone. They didn't believe me when I said I wasn't
Nikki Howard.

And why should they, when the proof that Page 63 Meg Cabot: Airhead I was Nikki Howard was spray-painted as big as a building just a street away?

They were puling at my jacket, threatening to tumble Cosabela out from under it. Who knows what they would have done, if Gabriel and Karl the doorman hadn't waded in and rescued me? One minute I was being mauled by a pack of screaming schoolgirls, and the next,

Karl was holding them off while Gabriel was steering me bodily away from them, one arm around my shoulders, saying in a wry voice, 'Now do you see why you can't take the subway?'

At least, not unless you're wearing a hat.'

It was a joke. Wel, sort of.

Except that the situation wasn't actualy al that funny. Because in a way, he was right. I was never going to be able to ride the subway again as an anonymous New York City citizen.

From now on, I'd be riding the subway as Nikki Howard, supermodel. Unless I carried around a giant sign that said, I'm not realy her. Don't bother asking for my autograph.

I must have looked realy crushed or something, since a second later, Gabriel
gave me a
little hug with the arm he'd put around me, and said with a sigh, 'Never mind. I'll
give you a
ride.'

And he gestured towards a pale green Vespa that was parked in the circular drive
in front
of the building.

That's right. A Vespa.

Which has to be the least cool mode of transportation in the universe. I mean, to American
guys.

But Gabriel wasn't American. And he obviously didn't care that his motorbike would be
considered, by the average American male, completely effeminate.

'I have helmets,' he assured me, I guess mistaking my astonishment for reluctance to ride

on a scooter due to the safety issue.

'OK,' I said faintly. I just wanted to get away from Nikki Howard's screaming fans - who

were still being held back by Karl and the frantic-looking nun - and Nikki Howard's crazy

room-mate and her boyfriend(s) and her building and the giant mural of her on the building

right down the street, and back to my family.

And I didn't care how I did it.
'Here,' Gabriel said, and handed me a motorcycle helmet from a compartment on the back of his Vespa. He helped me fit it over my head (or Nikki Howard's head). It didn't make my stitches hurt, which was good.

Then he helped me climb on to the bike, and showed me where to put my feet. Then he got on as well, and said, 'Hang on to me.'

Which I knew meant put my arms around his waist.

But of course I'd never touched a guy like that. I mean, aside from all the guys I've made out with in the past twenty-four hours. Which hadn't exactly been initiated by me.

Except before I had a chance to fully obsess over what I was about to do, some of the schoolgirls broke away from Karl and their teacher, and began tearing towards us, screaming, 'Nikki! Nikki!'

Then Gabriel started the motorbike up. There was a lurch and I had to grab him around the waist to keep from falling off the bike backwards.

And then he said, 'Here we go!'

And we went.

Airhead
I've lived in Manhattan my whole life.
I've eaten dim sum in Chinatown and brick-oven pizza in Little Italy. I've been to the top of the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty too. I've traced my ancestors back to their entry into this country (from England on my dad's side; Hungary on my mom's) via Ellis Island,
and I've spent hours getting lost in the Strand, the world's biggest used-book store.
I've had breakfast at Tiffany's (wel, a bagel outside it on a field trip to the Museum of Modern Art) and seen the Vermeers in the Frick (hard to believe he painted them without the help of a computer).
I've ridden the subway to Coney Island, used the paddle boats in Central Park and skated (though not wel) at Rockefeller Center. I've even been to the World Trade Center, back when it was stil the World Trade Center and not Ground Zero.
But I've never, ever cruised down Fourth Avenue on the back of a cute guy's motor scooter before.
And I have to say, it's the way to travel. It completely beats my other primary modes of
transportation - the subway and walking - hands down. Even though the wind was really cold

and made my eyes water - and Cosabela didn't seem too thrilled about being wedged

between my belly and Gabriel's back - it was super fun darting in and out of traffic, dodging bicycle messengers and almost running a red light . . .

. . . and best of all, feeling the warmth from Gabriel's back coming through the leather of

his jacket, and seeing him smile every time he looked back to make sure I was OK.

And even though he was smiling at Nikki Howard and not at me, I had to admit . . .

I could have ridden on the back of Gabriel Luna's Vespa all day. For the first time since I'd woken up in the hospital, I actually felt . . . good.

Not good about the fact that someone had apparently stuck my brain in Nikki Howard's body (so not).

But good about the fact that I was actually alive and got to experience cruising down

Fourth Avenue on the back of a cute guy's Vespa.

And that made me realize how very, very lucky I was. Whoever had done this - however

it had happened . . . the fact that it had enabled me to experience something like that - well, I
was grateful.

At least, about that part of it.

The part about all those schoolgirls wanting my autograph because they thought I was

Nikki Howard?

Not so much.

Unfortunately, we reached the hospital al too soon. Twenty blocks is a long way if you're

walking, but it isn't long enough if you're flying down the street on the back of a cute guy's pale

green Vespa. Just fifteen minutes or so later, we were pulling in to the underground parking

garage beneath Manhattan General.

And I started feeling nervous about the kind of reception I was going to get inside. I mean,

it was true I had been kidnapped. But I could have gotten away a lot sooner than I had. The

truth was, I had kind of been mad at my family for not telling me about the whole Nikki

Howard thing. What exactly had they been thinking?

So I'd sort of put off going back until I had to.

Now I had the feeling, based on what Gabriel said, I might be in trouble when I got there.

So when Gabriel pushed the button to get a parking slip, I said, 'Seriously you don't have
to come up with me, you can just drop me off.' Because I didn't want him to witness the

screaming I expected to ensue. I mean, even though I'm crushing on Christopher, not Gabriel

Luna, it's stil embarrassing to have a cute guy see your parents flip out on you.

'After what happened outside your flat?' he asked. 'Not a chance. I'm going to make sure

you get delivered safely.'

I felt myself flushing. 'What happened back there,' I couldn't keep myself from saying,

'what you saw, with Justin - that wasn't - he just showed up this morning. I didn't-

'I meant with the schoolgirls,' Gabriel said.

'Oh,' I said. I was glad the helmet hid my blush. Stil. I couldn't let it go. 'He isn't .

. . he isn't my boyfriend or anything.'

'Isn't he?'

I realized I'd just made what he'd seen on Center Street look infinitely worse.

'No,' I tried to explain. 'He's my room-mate's boyfriend. I think he . . . got the wrong

message.'

'I'd say so,' Gabriel said.

Oh. God.Obviously, I just needed to keep my mouth shut.

But I couldn't seem to do so. As we puled into a parking space, and Gabriel switched the
Vespa's engine off, I asked, 'How did you know? When no one could find me at the hospital.

To go looking for me at Nik - I mean, my apartment building?'

'Just a guess,' Gabriel said, taking his helmet, which I'd carefully peeled off, from me. 'A

lucky one, as it happens. I suppose I don't blame you for sneaking out, seeing as how they

won't let you have any visitors. But you really frightened them, you know, running off like that -

your parents, I mean. Or I suppose that's who they are - I haven't actually met them, but I saw

them when I stopped by your floor this morning, before they threw me out. Your mum was

crying. '

I chewed my lower lip. Even though I don't like like him, I didn't want him to think I was

the kind of girl who would run off from a hospital and make my 'mum' cry, any more than I

wanted him to think I was the kind of girl who'd stay out all night with a cheesebal like Justin

Bay . . .

I wanted to tel him the truth. About what had happened to me, I mean. I felt like he'd

really understand. Anyone who could sing like that - wel, he'd have to understand, wouldn't

he?
But I couldn't tell him. Because obviously, if they hadn't even told me, and I wasn't supposed to be receiving visitors except my immediate family, and they kept kicking people off my floor, this whole thing was supposed to be a secret. I didn't know why - but I was going to get to the bottom of it.

Today.

'It . . .' It was so weird, the two of us, having this moment - if that's even what it was, here in this parking garage . . . the same one where, just last night, I'd kicked and bitten Brandon Stark as he'd stuffed me into a limo. 'It's really nice of you to be so concerned about me,' I said. 'I mean, considering the fact that we hardly know each other.'

'Well,' Gabriel said. 'After what happened that day at Stark's, I feel as if I know you, at least a little. You gave us all quite a scare. You really . . . you ought to take better care of yourself, Nikki.'

I blinked at him in confusion. What was he talking about? 'I - what?'

Gabriel seemed to hesitate, as if he wasn't sure he wanted to say what he did next. But then he reached out and took one of my hands and said, looking down at me with that intently blue gaze, 'It's just that you're so lovely . . . and so sweet. You shouldn't throw
your life away

on drugs and alcohol.'

I think my eyes almost popped out of my head. 'What?' I croaked again, this time in

disbelief.

'I know your publicist is saying you were hospitalized for hypoglycaemia and . . . what was

it? Oh, right. Exhaustion,' he went on. 'But I was there that day, remember, Nikki? And I

honestly didn't think you were going to make it. You just lay there, so completely stil. I thought

you were dead.'

I don't think I could have spoken if I'd tried. He thought Nikki Howard had spent the past

month in the hospital because she'd been in rehab? Was that what everyone thought? Oh my

God! I was so embarrassed! I could feel my cheeks burning with shame . . .

On the other hand, what did I care what he thought about Nikki Howard? It didn't have

anything to do with me . . .

Oh, wait. I guess it did.

'But I'm not-' I started to say.

But Gabriel just shook his head.

'You don't have to make up excuses for me, Nikki,' he said, his voice as gentle as his
fingertips. 'I know how hard it is, living in the spotlight, having to listen to the gossip. And I'm glad you're getting the help you need now-'

'But-

'Everything's going to be alright now,' he said as he led the way to the elevators. 'I'm really pleased you decided to come back to the hospital. Your parents will be happy to see you.' He gave me a wry grin. 'Maybe they'll forgive me now for sneaking on to your floor the other night when I wasn't supposed to.'

'Um.' Cosy and I joined him in the elevator car as it arrived. I was feeling more dazed than ever. 'Yeah. About that-

'Admitting you have a problem is the first step towards conquering it, you know, Nikki,' Gabriel said, smiling down at me. I smiled back up at him because I couldn't help it.

But smiling at him turned out to be a mistake. Nikki Howard's smile was like kryptonite to guys, or something. It seemed to completely immobilize them. Gabriel seemed to totally forget where we were. The elevator doors closed, and then we just stood there for almost a whole minute, with Gabriel staring at me.

Helo. Awkward.
'Uh,' I said. 'I don't know what floor we're going to.'

'Oh.' Gabriel gave a start, then dropped my hand and hit the button for the fourth floor.

'Sorry.'

Before I had a chance to think of anything to say - such as, I am not now, nor have I ever,

been on drugs - however, the elevator doors slid open to reveal a burly security guard, who

said, 'Sorry, folks. Access to this floor is . . .' Then his eyes widened when he got a closer look at me. 'You!' he cried.

'Um, yeah,' I said. My cheeks were stil on fire. Drugs! Alcohol! Realy. Did I ask for any

of this? Are my mom and dad around?'

And the next thing I knew, Mom and Dad were al over me with their Where have you

beens and their We were worried sicks, hugging me and berating me at the same time. It realy

was just as embarrassing as I'd anticipated. Dr Holcombe was hovering around too, nervously

chewing on the end of his glasses while holding a clipboard. Dr Higgins - the female doctor,

who'd been wearing her hair in a bun - was beside him. Only her hair wasn't in a bun any

more. It was hanging al over the place, looking straggly, like she hadn't had a chance to fix it
up, given the whole part where I'd disappeared and everyone was freaking out about where I
was, apparently.

Which was going to be hard to explain, since I didn't want to rat out Lulu and Brandon, as
they'd genuinely thought they were doing the right thing.

On the other hand, I did have to answer my parents' questions.

But Gabriel Luna solved the whole problem for me by cutting everyone off and saying, 'I
found her at her flat.'

Which was when Dr Holcombe slid his glasses back into place and asked, 'Excuse me,
but who is this young man?'

It was right then that Frida came around the corner, her head down and her shoulders
slumped dejectedly. When she heard Dr Holcombe's voice, she looked up, saw me and broke
out into a huge smile . . .

. . . until her gaze fel on Gabriel. Then the smile vanished and she gasped. 'Gabriel Luna!'
she cried.

'That's Gabriel Luna?' Dad whispered to Mom in a perfectly audible voice. 'He's the one
who was here asking for Nikki Howard a little while ago.'

'That's the boy I saw beside her bed,' Dr Higgins said, pointing at Gabriel. 'He's
the one

who brought her the roses!

The glance Frida threw at me could have frozen coffee. 'He brought you roses?'

'He brought Nikki Howard roses,' I corrected her. Because I could see al too clearly

where this was heading.

'Wait . . . Gabriel Luna from the Megastore grand opening?' Mom asked.

'Yes,' Gabriel said, extending his right hand towards my parents. 'Helo. I'm sorry I didn't

introduce myself earlier, but you were busy having me thrown out. It's very nice to meet you.'

Mom, looking like she was in a daze, shook Gabriel's hand and murmured, 'Nice to meet you too,' while Dad, as soon as she was done, stuck out his own hand and, shaking Gabriel's,

said, 'Where have you been with my daughter?'

'Gabriel brought me back here,' I explained, rushing to Gabriel's defence. 'It's a long story,

but I didn't exactly leave on my own and . . . wel, he sort of rescued me.'

Gabriel flashed me a smile of thanks for this. Which I returned. In spite of the fact that he

apparently thought Nikki Howard was a drug addict, I figured he deserved some credit

anyway.

'Wel,' Dr Holcombe said, in a voice that was a little fake in its heartiness 'in that
case, we

have much to thank you for then, Mr, er, Luna.'

'It's nothing,' Gabriel said. 'Really. But I have to say, I think-

Dr Holcombe wasn't interested in hearing what Gabriel thought, however.

'Frida,' he said, cutting Gabriel off, 'why don't you show Mr Luna to the cafeteria and get

yourselves a bite to eat while your sister and parents and I Page 68 Meg Cabot: Airhead have

a little talk. Al right?'

Before Gabriel could say anything, Frida went from staring daggers at me to staring

lovingly up at him, her pupils practically going heart-shaped, like a cartoon character's.

'Sure,' she said in a breathy voice I'd never heard before and, taking hold of Gabriel's arm,

she cooed, 'Here, follow me. I'll show you the way.'

Which of course made me actually want to slug her, for acting so dopey. Why does my

sister always have to act like such - I'm sorry to say it, but it's true - a girl sometimes?

Although, now that I know what it actually feels like to get kissed, I guess I couldn't really

blame her.

'Uh,' Gabriel said, looking back at me as Frida led him towards the elevator we'd just
stepped out of, 'al right then, I guess, uh, I'll see you later . . .' 

'Bye,' I started to say, waving.

But before I could utter a word more, Frida had dragged him around the corner and he was gone. For al I knew, forever.

But I had more important things to deal with just then than my sister's completely inappropriate crush on a British singer-songwriter. And that included my mother, who was looking down at my half-open jacket and going, 'Oh my God. Is there a dog in your coat?'

'It's Nikki Howard's dog,' I explained.

'How in God's name,' Dad wanted to know, 'did you end up with Nikki Howard's dog?'

'Wel,' I said, 'it al started when I woke up and found that somebody had put my brain in Nikki Howard's body.'

Dr Holcombe, looking very uncomfortable, opened a nearby office door, and gestured for us to folow him, saying, 'Please. Come in. Sit. We need to talk.'

'Oh yes,' I said, folowing him with my head - or should I say Nikki Howard's head - held high. 'We do.'

Airhead
Thirteen

'You have to understand,' Dr Holcombe said as he sat behind his enormous mahogany desk, a cup of coffee cradled between his hands, 'the procedure we performed on you, Emerson, was necessary in order to save your life.'

'I get that,' I said. 'I doubt you go around doing brain transplants on people who don't need it. Although I don't know how I got lucky enough to be the first.'

Dr Holcombe cleared his throat. 'Er . . .'

'Wait.' I stared at him. 'I was kidding. You mean . . . I'm not the first?'

'Oh, my word, no,' Dr Holcombe said, laughing heartily.

'The youngest, definitely. But not the first, by any means.'

I blinked at him. 'But . . . wait a minute. I just saw a documentary on brain transplants a few months ago. It said none had ever been successfully done on a human being before.'

'Wel, none that we've ever publicized, no,' Dr Holcombe said. 'None of our recipients has ever cared to make the procedure public. Quite the opposite, as a matter of fact-'

'Recipients? You've mean you've done this . . . a lot?'

'Oh yes,' Dr Holcombe said. 'My team and I perfected the procedure some time ago.'
We've been performing it for several years now. It's extremely expensive - and still quite rare.

You came to us with injuries that, in any ordinary circumstances, would have been instantly fatal. It was pure serendipity that a viable whole-body donor became available at the same time your heart gave out.'

'Viable whole-body donor?' I echoed. I was shocked. 'You mean . . . Nikki Howard? I can't believe you just called her that. I mean, Nikki . . . she was aperson.'

'Doctor Holcombe is aware of that, Em,' my mom said quickly. She and Dad were sitting in a pair of leather chairs in front of Dr Holcombe's desk, while I sat between them, with Dr Higgins and Mr Philips, a 'legal representative' of Stark Enterprises, sitting on a couch a few feet away. When I'd asked, 'What does Stark Enterprises have to do with all this?' Mr Philips had said, 'You're actually under the care of the Stark Institute for Neurology and Neurosurgery, a division of Manhattan General Hospital, of which Stark Enterprises is a primary donor. It's the one and only medical centre in the world that performs whole-body transplants. Stark Enterprises doesn't publicize the institute's existence - or its connection with it, of course - because there are still some, er, bioethical concerns involved in the
procedure.'

'You mean because in order for someone to get a whole-body transplant,' I'd said, 'somebody else has to be declared brain-dead so they can snatch their body for the recipient's use?'

'Er,' Mr Philips had said, 'that's simplifying the matter a bit, but . . . yes, more or less.'

'Emerson,' Dr Higgins explained gently now, 'Nikki Howard suffered from a rare congenital brain defect that no one - not even Nikki herself - was aware of. It was an aneurysm - basically a ticking time bomb in her head, that could have gone off at any time . . .

but happened to go off at almost the same moment you were so gravely injured. Because there were so many medical personnel on hand at the time - the Stark Megastore staff had requested that an ambulance, in addition to a team of paramedics, be on site throughout the day in the event that the protests during the grand opening grew violent - they were able to act quickly enough to keep her - and you - alive for transport to this hospital. But once you both arrived here, it was quickly determined that neither of you had a chance to survive . . . at least, not on your own.'

'Right,' Dad said, his eyes looking very bright for some reason. I was shocked to
see that
the brightness in his eyes was due to tears. I had never seen my dad cry before. Except
during Extreme Home Makeover, of course. 'By the time your mother and I arrived, you were
on a life-support machine. They basically told us to say goodbye to you.'
'Until,' Mom added, her eyes equally shiny, 'Doctor Holcombe showed up and examined
you. Then he told us there might be one way to keep you alive . . . but that it was extremely
risky. And that there'd likely be . . . complications.'
'You mean like I'd wake up in someone else's body?' I asked. 'That kind of complication?'
'It's true you're not . . . wel, you any more, Em,' Mom said. 'On the outside, anyway. But
you're stil you on the inside. That's why Doctor Holcombe and his team felt it was better not
to tel you right away what had happened. You had already been through so much. You just
needed time . . . time to adjust-'
'Oh God.' I dropped my head into my hands. I couldn't believe this. I couldn't believe any
of this was happening to me.
And that Stark Enterprises was apparently behind it.
'Look,' I said, fighting back tears. How could my parents have gone along with any of this?
How could they have alowed this to happen? 'This isn't right. You can't do this. It's . . .
it's sick.'

'Now see here, young lady,' Dr Holcombe said, looking annoyed. 'What's sick about it?

Thousands of people are declared legally brain-dead every year, and thousands more find
themselves in bodies too infirm to continue living in. What is so wrong with providing those
patients with a second chance at life? Besides which,' he added, a little less irritably, 'I honestly
don't think you have any right to complain. You went into my surgery a grievously injured girl,

and came out a supermodel! Millions of girls would die - literally - to be in your shoes right

now!'

That's when I realized that even though this man had saved my life - even though at one
time, he'd wrapped his hands around my brain, gently lifted it, and then spent hours carefully

stitching it into place inside someone else's head - he didn't know me.

He didn't know me at al.

'But you didn't have my permission,' I accused him.

'Ah,' Mr Philips said, 'but we had your parents' permission.'

I swung an accusing look at Mom and Dad. Mom's eyes, I saw, were as bright with tears
as my own.

'You were going to die otherwise, honey,' she said. 'You wouldn't be here, if it weren't for

what Doctor Holcombe and his team did.'

I just looked at her. I may have had Nikki Howard's heart now, but it felt every bit as

heavy as mine ever had when I was upset about something.

'Fine,' I said, trying to sound reasonably adult - which wasn't easy to do, considering how

high-pitched and childish Nikki Howard's voice was. 'But if Stark Enterprises really wants to

keep this whole whole-body transplant thing a secret . . . well, it's not going to stay a secret for

long. Because people are going to notice something is up when I walk into school on Monday

and I look just like Nikki Howard, but I'm going around calling myself Emerson Watts.'

Mr Philips cleared his throat.

'That isn't going to happen,' he said calmly.

'But -' I looked from him to my parents and back again. Why did my parents look so . . .

so guilt-stricken? What was going on? 'Yeah, it is. I mean, I can't not go back to school.'

'Emerson Watts won't be going back to school,' Mr Philips said. 'Because Emerson Watts

no longer exists.'
'What do you mean, I no longer exist?' I asked. 'I'm sitting right here.'

'Em -' my dad's voice was gentle - 'look . . .'

I glanced at him. There was something about his expression - something I couldn't put my finger on.

But I knew I didn't like it. I saw that Mom, sitting next to him, wore much the same look on her face . . . sort of panicky, but sort of pleading at the same time. They both looked over at Mr Philips, then back at me.

Wait. Why were they looking at him?

'When we first got to the hospital,' Dad went on, 'and Doctor Holcombe here told us about the transplant, there were . . . well, there were certain conditions. Things we, as your parents, had to agree to before they would consider doing the surgery.'

I looked from Dad to Mom and then back again.

'What kind of things?' I asked, wondering what on earth they could be talking about.

Mr Philips pulled a thick pile of papers from a briefcase beside his chair and handed me a heavy stack from the top. I looked down and saw forty or fifty pages of fine print, neatly stapled, and notarized. At the bottom of each page were my parents' signatures.

'Well,' Mr Philips said, flipping through the copy of the contract he had in front of
him, 'for

one thing, they agreed that, in the event that your surgery was a success, you would honour all

Nikki Howard's contracts, endorsements and licensing agreements.'

My eyes bulged.

'What?' I looked frantically towards my parents. But both of them had their gazes glued to

the floor.

'In other words,' Mr Philips continued, apparently thinking I didn't understand what he'd

just said. Except that I had understood. I was just hoping against hope that he was wrong, 'you

will continue fulfilling Nikki Howard's duties as spokeswoman for Stark Enterprises. Failure to

do so will result in a full and immediate reimbursement to Stark Enterprises of the cost of the

surgery, and possible legal ramifications.'

Now I wasn't just staring. I was gaping.

'Wait,' I said. My heart was starting to hammer, hard, inside my chest. Or rather, Nikki

Howard's chest. 'Are you saying what I think you're saying?'

'I'm not certain what you think I'm saying, Miss Watts,' Mr Philips said. 'But if you mean,

am I saying that if you do not honour all Nikki Howard's Stark-related professional
commitments, your parents will owe this hospital two million dollars, in addition to legal fees -

and fines, including possible jail time, if confidentiality is also breeched - then yes, that is what I am saying.'

No. No, this wasn't possible. This was a hallucination. The part with Gabriel Luna? That had really happened. But this was unreal -

'Oh, and there was something else your parents agreed to,' Mr Philips went on.

'There's more?' I groaned.

'This part,' Dr Holcombe said, 'I can assure you is quite standard, Emerson. We require it of all our patients. For the protection of the institute. We can't let what we do here get out, of course. There are people - religious leaders, politicians - who wouldn't understand that what we do saves lives. If people were to leave here with entirely new bodies and faces, but still insisting they were the same person they were when they came in . . . well, as you suggested earlier, word would get out very quickly. That's why we require all our patients to allow us to declare their previous identities legally dead.'

My jaw dropped. 'But I'm not dead!' '

'Legally,' Mr Philips said, 'I can assure you
al comes down to the locus of identity. Just what is the locus - or perceived location - of our identities . . . our souls, as it were? Is it the brain? Or is it the heart and body? Nikki Howard's brain, it's true, is no longer functioning. Her heart, on the other hand, continues to beat.'

'Her . . . heart?'

I laid a hand over my heart. Or, I guess I should say, I laid Nikki Howard's hand over Nikki Howard's heart. I felt its steady thump-thump-thump. Up until that moment, the sound of my heartbeat had always been reassuring to me.

Now, it sounded . . . well, foreign.

'Emerson Watts's heart, however,' Mr Philips continued, 'stopped beating well over a month ago. If all motor function has ceased in a body, and the brain is removed, then that person, by the legal definition set in place by a landmark 1984 court decision here in New York state, is deceased. Whereas the person with the living brain and beating heart - in this case, Nikki Howard - is, legally, alive.'

My eyes widened. I couldn't understand any of this. Did this guy not realize I'm only in eleventh grade? Granted I'm in all AP classes. But still. 'What?' I asked again.

'What I'm trying to explain, Miss Watts,' Mr Philips said, slowly, as if by his
taking more
time to pronounce them, his words would make more sense to me, 'is that approximately

thirty-four days ago, Emerson Watts - according to the current definition of the word as

mandated by the laws of the state of New York - died.'

I did not like the sound of this. I did not like the sound of this one bit.

'Wait,' I said. 'So according to the state of New York, I'm dead?'

'Emerson Watts is dead,' he corrected me.

'But . . . I'm Emerson Watts,' I cried.

'Are you?' he asked with a little smile.

It was the smile that did it. Suddenly I was afraid. More afraid than I'd ever been in my life

. . . including when I'd seen that plasma screen television start to fall right where my sister was standing.

'Yes,' I said, leaning forward in my chair. 'Yes. Why are you - I mean, why are we - even
discussing this? What are you trying to tell me? Are you really going to sit there and tell me that

I'm dead, and that Nikki Howard is still alive?'

'Not at all. What I'm telling you, Miss Watts, is that you are Nikki Howard.'

**Airhead**
Fourteen

I was back in my hospital room - the only occupied patient room in the entire A wing of

the Stark Institute for Neurology and Neurosurgery - and back in a hospital gown. Dr

Holcombe and his staff wanted to run some more tests. How wel I did on the tests would
dictate how soon I got to go home - or, I guess I should say, to Nikki Howard's loft, since

that's where Page 73 Meg Cabot: Airhead my home was going to be once I was released,

now that I was to resume Nikki Howard's contractual responsibilities.

Of course, Mom and Dad told me I didn't have to go through with it. The part about

pretending to be Nikki. They said (later, when Stark's legal eagle, Mr Philips, wasn't around)

that they'd find a way to pay the two milion - and the legal fees and fines - if I didn't think I
could handle it.

'We can always declare bankruptcy,' Mom said, way too cheerfully.

Yeah. Because that's so what I want my parents to have to do for me.

I told them I wasn't worried. Not about Nikki Howard's contractual responsibilities. And I

wasn't. I mean, come on. How hard could modeling be anyway? You just have to stand there
in front of the camera with your stomach sucked in, right? Look at all those models Frida's
always reading about in her fashion magazines. They're not exactly rocket scientists.

But I'd already experienced enough of Nikki Howard's personal life to know it wasn't
going to be easy. Nikki's love life alone was . . . complicated. To say the least. That had my
stomach twisted up in knots (although that could have been the acid reflux Lulu had warned
me about).
The fact was, I was basically going to have to act like Nikki all the time. Only our
immediate family was to know the truth about who I really was. According to Mr Philips, a
story was going to be released to the public that Nikki had suffered a head injury when she'd
fainted due to her exhaustion and hypoglycaemia, and that the head injury had resulted in
amnesia. This was so that when I showed up for photo shoots and didn't recognize make-up
artists and stylists Nikki had worked with before, there'd be a rational explanation.
Though if Stark Enterprises really thought amnesia was a rational explanation, they needed
a major reality check.
I'd told Mr Philips right away that there was one problem: I might have already
mentioned
to Lulu Collins and Brandon Stark that I wasn't Nikki Howard.

But Mr Philips didn't look worried. He said, 'The amnesia story will take care of

that.'

And I realized he was right. Lulu and Brandon would totally believe I had

amnesia. They

were already prepared to believe I'd been the victim of brainwashing by Al-

Qaeda or a spirit

transfer. They'd believe anything.

That wasn't what I was worried about. Really worried about, I mean. What I

was really worried about was . . . well, Stark Enterprises. I mean, they already had

my family

in an iron grip there was no way we could squirm out of - how were two

professors ever going

to come up with two million dollars (and fines)?

But someone was also tracking Nikki Howard's keystrokes on her Stark-issued

computer. Someone who hadn't thought Nikki - or I - would notice. And I didn't

want to be

paranoid or anything, but I had a pretty good idea who that someone was.

And that was her employers at Stark Enterprises.

So, yeah. I didn't want to say anything, but that was concerning me. Stark

Enterprises and

their sudden omnipresence in our lives.

And one other thing. What had happened to me. The me Christopher had said so

long ago
looked fine.

'So . . . where's my body?' I asked my parents as we sat waiting for Dr Higgins to come

and escort me to the testing lab. 'I mean . . . the one I was born in?'

I saw them exchange glances. Then Mom said carefully, 'Well, honey . . . we had it

cremated.'

I stared at her in horror.

'We had to,' she went on quickly, seeing my expression. 'We had to have a memorial

service. We couldn't keep what happened to you a secret, there'd been paparazzi at the Stark

Megastore, following Nikki Howard around. They got the whole thing on film - it was on

CNN moments after it happened. Everyone saw that plasma screen land on you. There was

virtually nothing else on television for days - it was a slow news week. We had to have a

service. We didn't have any other choice.'

'You'll be happy to know it was very well attended,' Dad said, as if this was supposed to

make me feel better. 'Stark Enterprises paid for Grandma to come all the way from Florida -'

Suddenly, tears filled my eyes.

'Grandma thinks I'm dead?' I asked. No more T-shirts with World's Greatest
Grandchild printed on them for Christmas. No more birthday cards with twelve dollars tucked inside.

'Well, honey,' Mom said, chewing the inside of her lip. 'Yes. I'm sorry. But you know what a gossip she is around the pool where she lives. We really couldn't tell her the truth.'

I couldn't believe it. It turned out rumours of my death hadn't been exaggerated. I was dead. Legally. Medicaly. Technically. In every -aly, really, except the one way that mattered: literally.

I was dead, and I hadn't even been able to attend my own funeral.

'Was anybody from school there?' I asked. 'At my memorial service, I mean?'

'Of course,' Dad said, sounding a little hesitant for some reason. 'Christopher, and his father-

Now, for the first time since I'd woken up in Nikki Howard's body, I really lost it.

'Christopher?' I gasped. 'Oh my God. You mean you didn't tell him? Christopher thinks I'm dead?'

Mom and Dad exchanged panicky glances. Suddenly, I was crying so hard I couldn't even see them. I guess it wasn't any wonder they thought I was losing it. I saw Mom signal Dad to leave the room - no doubt to search out Dr Holcombe and ask him for more of
those coma
drugs to calm me down.

'Honey, you know we couldn't tel him the truth,' Mom said, coming to sit down beside me

on the bed and putting her arms around me. Cosabela, who'd been busily grooming herself at

my feet, hurried over to give me a few concerned licks as wel. 'We felt terrible about it, but . .

. wel, you heard what Mr Philips said.'

Oh, I'd heard what Mr Philips had said, al right. Thanks to Mr Philips, the mystery of

why Emerson Watts, eleventh-grader, had been saved using the incredibly rare and expensive

lifesaving technology of whole-body transplant had been cleared up.

She hadn't. Stark Enterprises had used it to save Nikki Howard.

Not me.

'I know it's awful to say,' Mom went on as she hugged me, 'but . . . Christopher wil get

over it. Eventua\ly. With time. He rea\ly wil.'

'G-get over it?' I wailed. 'My best friend th-thinks I'm dead, only I'm not, and I c-\ncan't

even tel him - and you think he'l just g-get over it?'

Frida chose that moment to strol into my room. Her brown eyes were practically crackling

with rage, and her chin was sticking out - sure signs she wanted to have a
confrontation with
me about something.

But she stopped dead in her tracks when she saw that I was crying.

'What's with her?' she demanded.

'She just found out about Christopher,' Mom said, gently rocking me. 'You know, thinking
she's dead.'

'Oh.' Frida stared at me. 'So? Don't worry about him. I saw him in school the other day
and he was fine.'

This just made me cry harder. It also caused Mom to say, 'Frida!'

'Wel?' Frida sauntered over to where my television's remote control sat on the bedside
table and picked it up, switched on the TV and began flipping channels. 'It's true. He was a
little upset at first, but he's already over it. I don't know why you're freaking out. You said he's
not your boyfriend anyway. Remember?'

Mom got up, let go of me and snatched the remote from Frida's hand in one fluid motion.

'May I have a word with you in the halway, young lady?' she asked briskly.

The two of them left the room. While they were gone, I tried to pul myself back together.

I couldn't believe how selfish I'd been, not having given Christopher a second thought since I'd
woken up. Except for the whole wishing-he'd-been-the-one-kissing-me-instead-of-Justin-or-

Brandon thing, I mean.

What could Christopher have been going through al this time, thinking I was dead? Was

he al right? How had he handled it, those moments after that TV had falen on me, right in

front of him? He must have been so freaked out. Who was he eating lunch with now that I

wasn't in school? He didn't have anyone else to make fun of the Walking Dead with, or to

play Journeyquest with, or to watch surgery shows on the Discovery Health Channel with.

Poor Christopher!

Unless . . . unless some other girl had snatched him up for herself. Only who? What girl at

TAHS (besides me) had the sensitivity to look past al that long hair and see the potential hottie

that lay beneath? What other girl was fine enough?

God. Surely there had to be one. She could be sitting down next to him in the

cafeteria right now, complimenting him on his avoidance of the tuna salad . . .

Suddenly Frida was back, this time by herself. She looked sulen.

'I'm supposed to apologize,' she said. Her gaze was on Cosabela, the now black
television screen, the window behind me - anywhere but on my face. 'So . . .
sorry if what I
said upset you. It's not true anyway. Christopher's not fine. I guess. But then . . . he was
always so weird anyway, it's kind of hard to tel.'
I had already dried my tears - or Nikki's tears, I guess, although Dr Holcombe told me not
to think of my new body that way. It's YOUR body, Emerson, he'd said. Not hers. Not any
more.
Right. I just had her name. Her face. Her loft. Her boyfriend(s). You name it.
'I don't get it,' I said to Frida. I stil felt like Page 76 Meg Cabot: Airhead crying every time
I thought about Christopher, and how a new girl might be getting to play Journeyquest - or sit
around and watch surgery shows - with him right this very minute. Although truthfully, the allure
of surgery shows had sort of waned for me. But I was trying to deal with it. As Dr Holcombe
had pointed out, at least I was alive. 'What's eating you?'
'Nothing,' Frida said. 'Gabriel left.'
For a second I didn't understand what she was talking about. Then I remembered how
she'd gone downstairs with Gabriel after he'd dropped me off.
'Oh,' I said. Was that what was eating Frida? She was jealous that I'd spent time with Gabriel Luna? 'OK.'
'He had to.' Frida flopped into the chair next to my bed. 'They wouldn't let him
back on
the floor.'

'Wel,' I said, 'I'm sure he'll learn to live with the disappointment.'

'God!' Frida glared at me. 'You don't even care about him, do you?'

'How can I care about him?' I demanded. 'I barely know him. And besides . . . ' I felt
myself flush as I was about to add, I like Christopher. But I couldn't admit this,
not even to my
sister. Not even now that Christopher thought I was dead, and I was in Nikki
Howard's body,
and I had no chance of ever getting Christopher to like me. So I changed it at the
last minute
to, 'He thinks I'm Nikki Howard.'

'So?' Frida shrugged. 'You shouldn't be so hard on him. He's a really nice guy. He
thinks
you're really great.'

'How do you know that?' I asked her, finding this hard to believe, since I had it
from the
guy's own lips that he thought I was a drug addict.

'He told me, of course,' Frida said. 'Down in the hospital cafeteria. We split a
cinnamon
bun. You know, one of those ones that are as big as my head? Totally fatty, but I've been
completely off my diet since your accident. It's hard to do the no-sugar thing when your sister
is having a brain transplant. So what did he rescue you from?'

I blinked at her. 'Excuse me?'

'You said back in the halway that Gabriel rescued you. What from?'

'Oh,' I said. 'Lulu Collins and Brandon Stark kidnapped me last night and took me to

Nikki Howard's loft. But you can't tel anyone, OK, Free? Because I don't want to get them

into trou-

'LULU COLLINS?' Frida was on her feet and shrieking. 'You met Lulu Collins? And

Brandon Stark? Are you kidding me? You hung out with them? Where did you go? Did they take you to Cave? Oh my God, did you get to see Justin Bay?'

'Whoa,' I said. 'Hold on. First of al, stop yeling. And second of al, no, it wasn't like that-

'Oh my God.' Frida stopped jumping up and down and looked at me, wide-eyed.

'Brandon Stark and Nikki Howard are - used to be - dating. If he thought you were Nikki, he

must have - did he try to kiss you?'

I shook my head. No way was I teling my little sister about Brandon's tongue-dive, let

alone what had gone on with Justin - or how much I'd enjoyed both.

'Of course not,' I said. 'He and Lulu were just worried about their friend. It realy sucks,

Free. I mean, that people think I'm Nikki.'
Frida, to my surprise, rolled her eyes. 'Oh yes,' she said sarcastically. 'Being mistaken for
the world's most famous teenage supermodel? I'm sure that Page 77 Meg Cabot: Airhead
must suck.'

'Um,' I said, stung. 'Actually, yes, it does. And thanks for telling me when I woke up.'

'Telling you what when you woke up?' Frida cocked her head to ask.

'About how they'd put my brain in Nikki Howard's body,' I said, injecting as much
sarcasm into my voice as possible. 'I appreciate it.'

If I was concerned Nikki's voice was too high-pitched and babyish for sarcasm to come
across, I needn't have worried. Frida looked immediately sheepish.

'Oh,' she said. 'That. Yeah, well, I wanted to. But they told me not to. They told me . . .
well, they said it might upset you. They wanted to give you time to adjust first.'

'Great,' I said, still working the sarcasm thing. 'Way to watch my back, sis.'

But I saw that I'd gone too far when her eyes filled up with tears and she said,
'Em . . . I

was really scared. I thought . . . these past few weeks I thought when you woke up, you

wouldn't even know who I was. They told me that you'd be . . . you know. Yourself. But then

I'd look at you, lying there, and I'd just see . . . Nikki Howard. And I thought, There's no way.
I mean, that you'd wake up and be your old self and be mad at me for trying out for cheerleading-

'You tried out for cheerleading?' I yeled. 'Are you insane? Do you know what Mom's going to do to you when she finds out? Because I'm assuming you haven't told her, seeing as how you're still alive.'

But Frida, instead of looking offended, burst out laughing.

'See?' she said. 'It's so great that I'm hearing that . . . well, kind of great, because it's still annoying. It's just so weird that all that annoying stuff is coming out of Nikki Howard. I guess it's better than never hearing it again, but-

'Hearing what again?' Mom asked, coming back into my room.

'Um,' Frida said quickly. 'Nothing. We were just talking about . . . clothes.'

Dad, following behind Mom, looked amused. 'That's what I like to hear. Things sound as if they're getting back to normal if you two are squabbling. ButEm was talking about clothes?'

'Well,' Frida said, looking panicky. 'No, not exactly . . . '

'We were talking about school,' I said quickly. 'And what's going to happen now? I mean, now that I'm going to have to start working, and I'll be living at Nikki Howard's loft and
everything, I guess I'm going to be way too busy for high school -'

'On the contrary, young lady,' Mom said, something like the old spark I knew so well

showing up in her eye, just as I'd known it would, at the suggestion I drop out of school.

'Under no circumstances will you be forsaking your education.'

'Absolutely not,' Dad said. He looked shocked. 'You can't put off college, and certainly not high school. There's no long-term financial stability in modeling, like there is in teaching or a career in law or medicine.'

'Of course,' Mom said, chewing her lower lip. 'With your schedule, attending regular school might be hard. We might have to look into enrolling you into one of those performing arts high schools. Or maybe getting you tutors. Perhaps Stark Enterprises could help us with that . . .'

Much as I disliked the idea of us allowing Stark Enterprises any more access to our lives, I shot Frida a triumphant look.

'Gosh,' I said. 'But I just love Tribeca Alternative so much. I'd really like to be able to keep going there, if I could.'

Mom and Dad looked plenty surprised to hear that. But their surprise was nothing
compared to Frida's scowl. I guess she'd thought, with me out of the way, she could just do

whatever she wanted - become a member of the Walking Dead, try out for cheerleading,

maybe even start going out with an upperclassman.

Wel, she'd thought wrong.

'Realy, honey?' Mom looked stunned. 'Wel, I suppose we could speak to Mr Philips. I'm

sure Stark Enterprises could arrange something with the school. There's no reason why, if your

schedule alows it, you shouldn't be able to take some classes there when you can. You may

not be able to graduate on time next year, but you stil graduate . . . eventualy.'

'That'd be great,' I said with completely false enthusiasm.

'Nikki Howard would never get into a school with academic standards as rigorous as

TAHS,' Frida, the expert on al things Nikki Howard, chimed in quickly. 'I mean, technicaly,

age-wise, I guess she'd be a junior like Em. But she dropped out of high school her freshman

year, when she got her first big modeling contract . . . '

'I'm sure if Stark Enterprises gave a big enough financial gift to the school, they could get

her in,' Dad said. 'If that's what you really want to do, Em. But, like Mom said, there are tutors

- and other schools we could try as wel.'
Frida turned towards me eagerly. 'Yeah, Em. See? You don't have to go back to TAHS.'

'Oh no,' I said, giving Frida the evil eye. 'TAHS is exactly where I want to go. And they can't act like they don't have space. We all know there's an opening in the junior class, don't we?'

And my going back there would kill two birds with one stone. . . . I could keep watch over Frida and make sure Christopher was OK. And, OK, it wouldn't be fair of me to make sure he wasn't dating other girls. I knew if I really loved him and all, I was supposed to set him free.

But . . . why should I, when I wasn't really gone?

And I also knew I couldn't tell him who I really was, either.

But still. Maybe we could become friends, like we were before the accident. And maybe . . . just maybe . . . more than friends. Like Brandon and Nikki were more than friends.

Only hopefully neither of us would be fooling around behind the other's back like those two appeared to have been doing.

The bad thing would be that I would always know something Christopher didn't know . . .

that apparently, a lot of famous people - because only the super rich (or people like me, who
had a massive corporation like Stark Enterprises paying for it) could afford a whole-body transplant - who we've been told are dead are actually really alive, just living in a new body.

I'm not going to name names (primarily because no one at the Stark Institute would tell me for sure), but hints were dropped that a lot of famous people - some of whom had been about to be sentenced for crimes like securities fraud, several others of whom were famous musicians long thought to be dead by their adoring fans, and still others of whom were members of certain British and European royal families - who supposedly 'died' are actually alive and well and just living in different bodies under assumed identities, while their family members go around pretending to have passed away.

But the joke's on us, because they aren't dead at all. In other words, Christopher and I were right all along: there really are Walking Dead.

The problem?

Now I'm one of them.

**Airhead**
Fifteen

The press release went out the next afternoon.

I couldn't go online to Google News it of course, since I was still lacking a computer

(although, given the state of Nikki's computer, this was probably just as well). But I saw it on

the running scroll at the bottom of CNN, and then again later, on the evening news.

Then, next thing I knew, it was the lead story on all the entertainment news shows.

It turns out Kely, Nikki's publicist, didn't mess around when it came to her most popular client.

'The fashion and beauty industry breathed a collective sigh of relief this evening when a

statement was issued from representatives of Nikki Howard,' chimed Entertainment Tonight,

as photos of Nikki Howard flashed up on the screen, 'assuring her fans that the teen

supermodel would be back at work this week after a month-long absence from the catwalk

and the New York City club scene. Fashionistas worldwide have been alarmed by reports that

Nikki was suffering from exhaustion and hypoglycaemia, which are said to have been
responsible for that now famous fall she took at a Stark Megastore grand opening last month,
giving her concussion and a bona fide case of amnesia . . .

The next photo to flash across the screen was one that caused me almost to choke on the

bag of Wasabi Peas Frida had smuggled in for me at my request, and which I’d been inhaling

(yes, I know. I used to hate them. Now I love them. Dr Holcombe says it's normal for patients
to find themselves with tastes quite unlike the ones they used to have in their previous bodies).

It was a grainy cellphone photo of me (wel, of Nikki Howard) on the back of Gabriel
Luna’s green Vespa. Both of us were looking back at the photographer with slightly alarmed
expressions on our faces - though I don't remember anyone taking my picture that day.

The alarmed expressions were due to the fact that we were being pursued by a herd of

stampeding fourth-graders.

But of course it looked as if we were upset over the fact that we were being photographed
together. A fact the television news 'journalists' were only too quick to point out.

'Perhaps amnesia is the excuse Nikki will give on-again, off-again boyfriend Brandon Page
80 Meg Cabot: Airhead Stark for this photo snapped yesterday of the model
taking a joyride on a motorbike belonging to hot new British singing sensation Gabriel Luna. The pair met at the same SoHo Stark Megastore opening at which Nikki suffered the fainting spell responsible for her head injury, and at which a young fan was killed during a melee caused by ELF protesters.'

I waited in horror for the reporter to show a picture of me - the old me. But I should have known they wouldn't. I was yesterday's news . . . if I'd ever even been news at all. Why report about a girl being killed by a falling TV when you could show pictures of Nikki Howard on red carpets with her dress slit up to her belly button?

'Representatives for both Howard and Luna had no comments on the photo. But perhaps Nikki can tell Brandon she just “forgot” that she already had a boyfriend . . .' Oh my God. I couldn't believe it. I could barely breathe, I was so upset. But the story didn't even end there.

'Stark Enterprises founder and CEO Robert Stark has issued a statement,' the reporter went on, 'expressing get well wishes for Howard - whom many refer to as the Face of Stark . . .'

The camera panned towards an older, craggy-faced version of Brandon Stark - his father,
dressed casually in an open-colared shirt, who said, 'We here at Stark Enterprises respectfully request that the press, during this period of recovery for Nikki, afford her the privacy she needs. For the next few weeks at least, Nikki will be spending slightly less time in the limelight.

She even told me she's considering going back to school - 'he grinned as this statement provoked chuckles from the press corps, as if the idea of Nikki Howard attempting to get her high-school degree was the funniest thing in the world - 'a decision we here at Stark Enterprises are behind one hundred per cent.'

What? I'd never told Robert Stark any such thing. I'd never even met the guy. And great.

My own boss - wel, Nikki's boss anyway - thinks she's too stupid to make it through high school. Nice. Thanks for the support. He probably thinks that because he's been reading her emails.

'But highjinks like this,' the reporter went on to say, flashing the photo of me on the back of Gabriel's motor scooter on to the screen again, 'may just get this model student detention!'

Then a new reporter came on to talk about the current celebrity-divorce scandal. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe one of those schoolgirls had snapped a
photo of me

and Gabriel . . . and sold it! Was this what my life was going to be like from now on? Being

stalked by paparazzi, my most innocent activities being spread al over the tabloids?

I was so busy staring at the television screen above my bed in horror, I didn't even see the

person who came into my room a minute later.

'Nikki?' The eyes looking out at me over the top of the surgeon's mask were huge . . . and

not just because they were rimmed in black kohl.

Lulu Colins had snuck on to my floor again. This time she'd added to her ingenious

disguise by carrying around a medical clipboard.

I know. The mind boggles.

Wel, it was late, and most of the staff - including my father, whose turn it was to spend the

night at my bedside - were gathered in the lounge, Page 81 Meg Cabot: Airhead watching

some kind of sporting event. I didn't know which one, because I couldn't have cared less.

So it hadn't been hard for Lulu to slip past the security guards posted at the doors.

Especially in her current ensemble.

'Hi, Lulu,' I said a little glumly.
'You remember me?' Lulu lowered the mask, her face breaking out into an enormous smile. 'Oh, Nikki . . . when they said you had amnesia, I knew they were making it up.'

'No,' I said quickly. 'Sorry, Lulu. I really . . . I mean, I just know you from before. Remember? When you kidnapped me?'

'Are you sure?' Lulu asked, her tiny shoulders sagging. 'It's just . . . well, I saw the thing on TV and I started thinking, you know, maybe you guys had swapped back. You and that Em girl. Because hopping on to the back of that guy's scooter? That was such a totally Nikki thing to do. Brandon is soooo mad!'

I paused. 'Brandon? Angry? At me?'

'Wel, sure,' Lulu said, coming over to plop herself down at the side of my bed. 'I mean, I don't know where Brandon gets off thinking it's OK for him to dance with whoever he wants all night long, but not OK for you to get a ride on some other guy's Vespa. That's a total, like, whadduyacalit.'

'Double standard?' I offered.

'Yeah, I guess. But anyway. When I saw the picture, I got totally excited. I thought maybe you were back. I mean, that Nikki was back. The real Nikki. Cosabela is missing too, so I
thought maybe you'd come home and taken her-

'Lulu,' I said, 'Cosabela's here.' I pushed back my sheets to reveal the bal of fluff sleeping at my side. 'I'm sorry. Back at your place yesterday morning, she was crying, and . . . wel, I just didn't have the heart to leave her behind.'

'Oh.' Lulu's voice sounded smal. 'OK. No, that's good. Cosy did miss you. I mean, Nikki.

I mean . . . Oh, I don't know what I mean. So I guess that was you on the back of that guy's bike? Not . . . the real Nikki?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'That was me. Listen, Lulu. About the whole spirit-transfer thing . . . '

'Yeah?' Lulu sounded congested. Had she been crying?

I had no time to worry about her tears now. Any minute, my dad or one of the nurses - or worse, Dr Holcombe himself - might come into my room and figure out who I was talking to.

And somehow I didn't suspect any of them would be very thriled. Al their talk of fines and jail time - wel, Stark Enterprises seemed dead serious about keeping this thing a secret.

And I didn't want Lulu to get into trouble. In spite of what a space case she was, she stil seemed realy sweet.

'Lulu,' I said, 'there was no spirit transfer. It turns out I, um, hit my head. And
now I have

amnesia. So that's why I didn't remember you. Or Brandon.'

Silence. Lulu stared at me with eyes as wide as a Precious Moment figurine's. Then she let

out a slurpy, 'No way.'

'Um,' I said. 'Yeah. That's what happened. Everything they've been saying on the news.

It's true.'

'I don't believe you,' Lulu said. 'Or the news. I know that's what Kely is going around

saying now. But it's not true.'

'Lulu,' I said, feeling desperate. I had to make her believe me. I couldn't risk having my

parents pay two milion dolars. Or, rather, file for bankruptcy, since they didn't have two

milion dolars, 'it is true. Why don't you believe me?'

'Because even if she had amnesia,' Lulu said, 'Nikki would never do that to her nails.'

And she reached out and grabbed my hand.

I looked down, following the direction of her gaze, and saw what she meant. During that

meeting with Dr Holcombe and Mr Philips, I'd bitten off all the carefully manicured tips until

they were ragged . . . just like my old nails had been.

'Nikki would never, ever do something to hurt her body or make herself ugly,'
Lulu went

on, sounding almost savage in her conviction that what she was saying was true. 'So I don't

know who you really are . . . but you aren't Nikki. So don't even try with the

amnesia thing. It

might work with everyone else. But I was Nikki's best friend. I know everything

about her.

And I know she would never, ever do that.'

I stared at her and the grim set of her tiny little mouth. Lulu didn't know

everything about

her alleged 'best' friend Nikki. She didn't, for instance, know that her best friend

Nikki had

been fooling around behind her back with Lulu's boyfriend, Justin.

But over my dead body - literally - was I ever going to let Lulu know about that.

Stil, Lulu deserved the truth - what truth I could tell her without hurting her - if

anyone did.

And so I said, 'OK, Lulu. You're right. I'm not really Nikki Howard. The truth is, the

doctors here stuck Emerson Watts's brain into Nikki Howard's body. And I'm not supposed

to tell anyone, or my parents will owe two million dollars - which they don't have - to Stark

Enterprises, who paid for the whole thing, I guess to keep their spokesmodel alive after Nikki

suffered a fatal aneurysm that day at the Megastore opening.'

Lulu blinked back at me. Once. Twice.
Then she burst out laughing.

'Yeah, right,' she said. 'Good one!'

I blinked back at her.

'I know,' I said. 'It sounds like a made-for-TV movie or something. But you know, they have this new Nikki Howard beauty and clothing line coming out, and I guess they spent a lot of money on it or something, and they want me to pretend to be her so they can keep on-

'Right!' Lulu interrupted. She was practically rolling off the bed, she was laughing so hard.

'Like if they were really going to do something like that, they'd pick someone as clueless as you are to take her place!' She reached up to wipe away tears of laughter. 'Um, no offence or anything. I'm sure you're nice. But Nikki's job is really hard. I mean, do you even have any modeling experience?'

I tried not to laugh. I mean, at the Nikki's job is really hard part.

'No,' I said drily. 'But I think I'm going to be able to handle it.'

'Oh, right,' Lulu said again, laughing even harder. 'Do you even know what a Manolo tip is?'

'Well,' I said, thinking back to all those copies of COSMOgirl! Frida left lying around, 'a
Manolo is a type of shoe, right?'

Lulu made a delighted noise. 'Oh God,' she cried. 'I can't believe this. This is going to be
great! Nikki's going to laugh her ass off when she hears about this. You know you're not going
to last a minute out there, don't you?'

'Wel,' I said, slightly stung, 'that's why they made up the amnesia story. So if I screw up,
we can blame it on that. Why? What is a Manolo tip?'

But Lulu ignored the question.

'God,' she said, 'this is hilarious. I can't wait to tel Brandon-

'No,' I cried, reaching out to grasp her spool-thin wrist. 'Lulu. You can't. I told you. It's a
secret. I mean, I'm going to be coming to live with you - in Nikki's place - and everything.

We're going to be room-mates - or loft-mates or whatever. But seriously. You can't
tel anyone. Or my parents wil get into big trouble.'

She stared at me, suddenly serious.

'OK,' she said gently. 'OK, Nik - or whatever your name is. Listen -' she swung her tiny
feet, in four-inch stilettos, above the floor - 'Do you want me to cal Bliss? Because I could
totally set up an appointment for you with an emergency-nail-repair technician.'

'No,' I said. 'That's OK. Listen, Lulu. When I was at your place - our place - I
noticed

something about Nikki's computer.'

Lulu looked instantly bored. She studied her cuticles. 'Yeah? What?'

'Someone's spying on Nikki's emails,' I said. 'Basicaly anything she types or looks up on

it. In real time, from a remote location. Do you have any idea who'd do that?'

'No,' Lulu said. 'That's a brand-new computer. Mr Stark gave it to her. He gave me one too. They're pink.'

'Yes,' I said. 'I know it's pink. Mr Stark gave you one too?'

'Uh-huh. They're the newest models from Stark Enterprises. Or something.' Lulu blew a

bubble, then skilfully popped it. 'What do you mean, spying on Nikki's emails?'

It was at that moment that one of the nurses came in, holding my patient chart.

'Er, helo,' she said when she saw Lulu perched on the end of my bed. 'Do I know you?'

'Oh, no,' came Lulu's airy reply as she hopped off my bed and glanced busily down at her

own (stolen) chart. 'Just making rounds. You know.'

The nurse, who was clearly no one's fool - perhaps recognizing that most nurses wore

Crocs, not stilettos - narrowed her eyes. 'Excuse me,' she said, 'but where's your pass for this

floor?'
'Oops, there's my beeper,' Lulu said. 'Gotta go, bye!' She scooted out of the room while the nurse rushed after her, crying, 'Wait! You, there!'

I totally hoped she escaped.

It was weird. If someone had asked me just a month ago what I thought about Lulu Colins, I'd have replied that I thought she was another shallow celebrity, obsessed with clothes and partying.

And I stil think that about her.

Except . . . I think I'm starting to like her.

So what does that say about me?

Sixteen

And the next thing I knew, I was being released.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised . . . that they were releasing me, I mean. They'd completed every test under the sun that they could conceivably do on me. The strangest part was that, wel . . . I'd passed them al.

And these were mainly physical tests. Let's just say that I've never performed wel in tests of my physical endurance. I've never exactly aced PE. I've always been the last person chosen
for teams in voleybal and basketbal. I've always made a point to play outfield in softbal, so

that in the unlikely event a bal ever did come my way, I had plenty of room to get out of the

way. I was crafty about coming up with excuses as to why I had to sit out from bowling or

swimming or even Rolerblading. I've just never liked physical exertion. I prefer reading. Or

playing video games.

So naturaly some of the results from my tests astonished even me. I mean, I was required

to run on a treadmill for ten minutes straight - and I could actualy do it . . . even after having

been in a coma for over a month! In my old body, I wouldn't have lasted more than a minute,

maybe two, at a slow jog. I'd have hyperventilated, or worse.

Nikki Howard, however, had kept her body in superb condition. It wasn't actualy hard to

see why, since fattening foods upset her stomach, and anything processed seemed to taste like

chalk on her tongue, forcing me to radically alter my former diet of chips and sweets in favour

of healthy stuff I wouldn't have touched before in a milion years, like fish and vegetables.

Which my new stomach found comforting and my new tongue found delicious. I know. I was kind of depressed about it too.
The thing was, Nikki could run, swim, even jump rope for up to half an hour at a time before even starting to feel tired.

What's more, in her body, it was even pleasurable to do these things. For the first time, I got what they meant when they talked in PE about runner's high. I felt GOOD after exercising.

Finally, I got it . . . about the whole exercise-being-fun thing.

Too bad I'd had to get a whole new body before I did so.

Once I'd passed all the tests Dr Holcombe sent Dr Higgins to do on me, he signed my release papers and said I could go home . . . but that I would of course need to come in for more tests from time to time, as well as periodic check-ups.

Even though I'd been unconscious during most of my stay with them, the staff lined up to say goodbye to me on my way out . . . only I had to leave down the service elevator of course, because once Nikki's publicist, Kely - who had arrived to pick me up and take me to my first assignment, a photo op with Robert Stark himself, to show the world that Nikki Howard might have amnesia, but she was fine! Just fine! - had issued her press release about

Nikki Howard's amnesia, the front lobby to the hospital had been jammed with press, eager to
get a shot of Nikki leaving the place.

I shook hands with Dr Holcombe, Dr Page 85 Meg Cabot: Airhead Higgins and the rest

of the doctors and nurses and orderlies who had cared for me. Dr Higgins and a few of the

nurses broke protocol and hugged me, accidentally squashing Cosabela a little in the process,

then laughing about it.

I stopped laughing when it came time to hug Mom and Dad goodbye though. Because

they were not taking the whole letting-their-baby-go-even-though-they-had-no-choice-in-the-

matter thing wel. In fact, they had already insisted on issuing me a Stark-brand cellphone, on

which I was to check in with them three times a day (and on which they'd be caling me

approximately every five minutes, judging from the look on Mom's face).

They weren't the only ones who were worried. I'd never lived away from them - except

for a few weeks each summer, when Frida and I had worked as counselors at sleep-away

camp. I was trying to put on a brave face about it, but I was basicaly terrified - and also the

tiniest bit angry. I know they hadn't had any choice and al, but realy . . .

A supermodel? For Stark Enterprises?

Frida I wasn't so worried about missing. She and I had already shared a 'special
moment'
alone in my hospital room while I'd been packing my (admittedly few) things to leave.

'God,' she'd said. 'I can't believe you had Nikki Howard's entire closet to choose from,
and what you've got on is what you picked. Those Skechers are so pathetic. If you wear them
to school, I'm going to die of embarrassment.'

'Frida,' I'd snapped, particularly stung by her tone, because I was already so worried
about everything else. 'No one knows I'm even related to you any more, OK? So you don't
have to worry. And could you give me a smal break? I'm stressed enough as it is, I don't need
you ragging on me about my fashion choices.'

'Oh, please tell me again,' Frida had mock-begged, 'about how you don't know how to
handle it because you're so beautiful now . . .'

'What I don't know how to handle,' I'd said, through gritted teeth, 'is the fact that my own
sister tried out for cheerleading.'

'I didn't just try out for cheerleading,' Frida had bragged. 'I made the squad.'

I'd gaped at her. I go into a coma for a month, and my own sister becomes a member of
the Walking Dead (only not literally, like me)? Her assimilation was almost complete! She was
just one spray-tan away!

'No,' I'd said, refusing to look at her. 'You're just saying that to get a rise out of me. I don't believe you.'

'Believe it,' Frida had informed me. 'Just because you hate our school and have zero school spirit, Em, doesn't mean I do. And don't think your showing up there as Nikki Howard is going to intimidate me. Because it's done. I'm on the squad.'

'Frida.' I hadn't known how to explain it to her . . . especialy since Mom had already tried so many times, and evidently failed. 'Cheerleading is . . . wel, it's evil.'

'Cheerleading is a SPORT, Em,' Frida had shot back. 'If I wanted to try out for the basketball team, would you be giving me a hard time?'

'Wel,' I'd admitted, 'no. Because you don't have to wear a skirt and HALTER TOP when you play it.'

'Look, I have news for you, Em.' Frida had looked more serious than I'd ever seen her.

'Cheerleading is something I've been wanting to try for my whole life. I was realy lucky to make the team . . . even if it's only JV - and I don't intend to let you or Mom spoil it. I know I'm not pretty and little like the other girls on the squad . . . I know they only let me on because
I'm a good spotter and I can hold up my end of a pyramid. I can't do a back handspring or even that great a cartwheel. But I'm going to work hard, and take TAHS to the tumbling championships this year. And then Page 86 Meg Cabot: Airhead both you and Mom will be sorry you looked down on something that brings so much pleasure to so many people.

Especially me.'

I'd just stared at her. Until she'd added, 'And if I'm not mistaken, in some of the ad campaigns Nikki Howard's contracted for, and that you're going to be doing now, you're going to be wearing a lot less than a halter top - helo, Victoria's Secret model. And you can walk in there and tel the art director how sexist his ad campaign is, but guess what? They'll just hire some other girl to replace you. So you better get over yourself.'

At which point she'd turned on her heel and stalked from my room, right past Mom and Dad.

'What's eating her?' Dad had wanted to know.

But I hadn't told him. I had bigger things to worry about than Frida - who had lately more than proved she could take care of herself - just then. I was minutes away from officialy
starting my new life as Nikki Howard on the outside, and Em Watts on the inside.

I hadn't exactly been given any guidelines of course, as to just how I was supposed to accomplish this. Dr Holcombe and his team were scientists, not social workers, and they had no idea what to tel me about being Nikki Howard. Their job was over: I was alive.

Granted, I was living someone else's life. But what I did with that life, apparently, was up to me . . . and Stark Enterprises.

Stil, I was realy, realy hoping that I wouldn't screw it up for my family. And myself.

Standing in front of Mom, Dad and Frida now, I wiped the nervous sweat off my hands - Cosabela's fur was proving excelent for this - and said awkwardly, 'Wel. So. I'l come by as soon as I have a night off.' The truth was, I didn't want to commit to a particular night for dinner with my parents in front of Mr Philips, who was standing right there, watching. I figured Stark Enterprises knew enough about my personal business.

But Mom didn't catch on. I probably should have just told my parents about Nikki's computer. But the truth is they're both so untech savvy, they'd probably think spyware is
something you eat with.

'Friday for sure, no excuses,' Mom said firmly, standing on tiptoe to kiss my cheek. She'd

never had to stand on tiptoe to kiss me before. 'We'll go to Peking Duck House on Mott

Street. That was always your favourite.'

I rolled my eyes in Mr Philips's direction. He was tapping on his Blackberry. Interesting

that he didn't carry a Stark-brand handheld personal organizer.

'Maybe,' I said. 'I'll cal you.' But not on this Stark-brand cellphone I wouldn't.

'Friday,' Dad said, giving me a squeeze that caused Cosabela to grunt in protest as she

was squashed. 'You heard your mother.'

'Cal us as soon as you get there,' Mom said, fussing with my jacket. 'I wish you had a

warmer coat than this. I should have brought you something from home.'

'Mom,' I said.

'Surely Nikki has warmer coats than this,' she said, picking at the slim jacket I'd plucked

from Nikki's closet. 'Promise you'll find something warmer to wear tomorrow.'

'Mom,' I said.

'It's November,' Mom said. 'Here, take my Page 87 Meg Cabot: Airhead scarf at least.'

She wrapped her scarf around my neck.
'Mom,' I said as she twined the wooly scarf around my neck tightly enough to strangle me.

'I'm just getting straight into a limo and then out again when I get there, I don't need-'

'Don't forget to cal,' Mom said, hugging me again. Then she let me go as suddenly as if she'd had to force herself.

Both Cosabela and I felt a little bruised by the time we got to Frida, to whom I said awkwardly, 'So. See you in school tomorrow?' Mr Philips had succeeded in securing me a place at Tribeca Alternative, and I'd gotten permission to start there whenever my schedule permitted. Which I was hoping was going to be tomorrow.

Frida shrugged. 'Yeah. Whatever,' she said. We gave one another wary pats on the back -

although hers was more on my waist because she was so much shorter than I was - and then I turned around, barely able to see due to the sudden tears in my eyes. I think it was the scarf that did it.

That's when a red-headed woman in a bright green skirt suit, with one of those headsets in her ears, stepped forward and, escorted by two armed security guards, took me by the arm and began steering me into the elevator, going, 'Yeah, yeah, we got her,' into the
Father.

'We're on our way. ETA to Stark Corporate, fifteen minutes.'

One of the security guards stabbed the B button for basement, and then, as the elevator doors slid shut on the tearfully smiling faces of my family, the woman in the green skirt suit turned to me and said, switching off her Stark-brand headset and smiling in a very fake way,

'Nikki, darling.' She smelt of expensive perfume. 'I'm so glad you're feeling better. I was so worried! Oh, right, I forgot, you don't remember me. Kely Foster-Fielding.' She held out her hand to shake mine in a grip so firm I thought my own would be crushed. 'I'm your publicist.

How are you feeling, honey?'

I blinked at her. Did she really not know, or was this a put-on for the security guards? Did Stark Enterprises not tell her? I mean, that I wasn't really Nikki Howard?

But Kely didn't even wait for a response from me. Instead, she whipped a Blackberry from her oversized tote and, pressing buttons on it so quickly her thumbs were a blur, went,

'I'll be trying to give you a little breathing room this week so you can ease back without getting completely slammed - and I get the school thing, I really do - but there are a few people I
haven't been able to put off. COSMO wants you for its January cover and won't take no for
an answer. I'm telling you, Nik, this amnesia thing is pure gold, since they want to do a piece
on you too. But I'm not promising them anything, because I've also got requests for both
covers and pieces from Vogue, Ele and People - wel, we can scratch People, I don't know
who they think you are, an American Idol winner? But this is the big news: Larry King. Right?
You and Larry, dishing the dirt? I'm trying to put them off until you've actualy got something to
hock. It's a complete waste otherwise. Listen, I'm fielding offers from three publishers for a
book deal . . . a roman- -clef, tel-al, how-I-overcame-losing-my-identity . . . whatever you
want, they don't care. They'll hire a ghostwriter, al you have to do is let them slap your photo
on the cover -'
The elevator doors slid open and, taking my arm again, Kely dragged me quickly towards
the waiting ink-black stretch limo, while both the security guards flanked us. We'd barely gone
two feet before half a dozen paparazzi leaped out from the shadows and, shouting Nikki's
name, began to snap pictures of me, their long telephoto lenses so close they would have
jabbed me in the eye if the security guards, saying calmly, 'Al right, guys, let the ladies through,' hadn't shoved them out of the way and guided us into the waiting car.

Once we were safely inside the cool leather Page 88 Meg Cabot: Airhead interior of the limo, and the door had been shut behind us and the car was on its way, Kely went on, as if she hadn't even been interrupted, 'Anyway, al of this is great news. If we can time the release of the book so it coincides with the release of the new clothing and beauty lines - sister, you can't PAY for that kind of publicity. And they'll be paying US! Oh, and of course al the usual places want you: the morning news shows and Elen and Oprah and The View and so on. I'm holding them off as best I can, but you're going to have to do one of them -'

I, meanwhile, was collapsed against the seat opposite her, completely stunned by the incident that had just taken place, Cosabela clutched to my chest, her little heart fluttering against mine. I didn't know which had shocked me more - the paparazzi, what Kely had just said, or the fact that Brandon Stark was sitting across from me, his arms folded over his chest.

He appeared to be fuming about something, if the curl of his lip was any indication.
'Um,' I said tentatively. 'Hi?'

He looked pointedly away. Kely, meanwhile, continued her rapid-fire speech, which I could barely follow. In her mid-to-late thirties, with her bright red hair cut into a pageboy that perfectly framed her pale, expertly made-up face, she seemed as put together as any woman I had ever seen. There wasn't so much as a single snag in her misty black tights, and the heels of her patent-leather pumps had to be four inches at least. I had no idea how she walked, let alone how she'd run from the photographers back there.

'I'll admit, Oprah's not exactly your target demographic,' Kely went on. 'But it can't hurt. Nêmcová did it after that whole tsunami business, if that's how we want to model this. But it doesn't matter, because - big news. Are you ready for this? Sports Illustrated caled.'

I could tell by the way she'd said it that I was supposed to react somehow. But I didn't know what to say. I hate Sports Illustrated. It's all about . . . well, sports.

'That's great,' I said. Wow. This modeling thing was going to be a bit harder than I'd thought. 'Right?'

'Nikki!' Kely looked as if she was about to throw her Blackberry at me. 'You've only
been after me for two years to get you SI. Wel, they finaly caled. And they want you. For the

next swimsuit issue. Could you DIE?'

She accompanied the word DIE with a shove to my shoulder. I slumped over on to the

seat. What I realy wanted to say was, 'Actualy, yeah. I could die. In fact, I already did.'

But what I said instead was, 'Wow. That's great. Thanks.'

Kely looked at me for a ful second. Then she went, 'You could summon up a little bit

more excitement for me, couldn't you? Just a little bit? It's SI, honey. There's a chance you

could end up on the cover. In fact, I know you wil. I can feel it in my bones - Brandon, no, no

more Red Bul, you're cranky enough.'

Brandon slammed the limo's refrigerator door and sank back into his seat, looking churlish.

'So?' Kely looked at me expectantly. 'Aren't you excited?'

'I'm super excited,' I said. Though the truth was, al I felt was a growing dread. 'So . . . I'm

going to have to pose for this in a bathing suit?'

'A bathing suit.' Kely laughed. 'God, you realy do have amnesia. It's caled a swimsuit,
honey. OK? And, oh my God, what have you done to your nails?'

She seized both my hands and sat there
horror at my fingernails. Or I guess I should say Nikki Howard's fingernails, which I'd bitten down almost to the quick.

'I - I guess I bit them a little,' I said in a smal voice.

'A little?' The next thing I knew, Kely had flung my hands back into my lap and put her headpiece back on. 'Yes, Doreen? Hi, it's Kely. We're going to need some emergency nail tips. Yes, I know it's last minute, but what am I supposed to do, I just saw them. Hideous.

No, I know she's never had problems before, but we're dealing with a whole new bal game here. You would not believe . . . great. See you then, hon.'

Kely hung up, then looked at me in a very disapproving way. 'You're only hurting yourself, Nik,' she said to me, shaking her head. 'You're only hurting yourself.'

Inexplicably, my eyes filed up with tears.

I know! I was crying, over FINGERNAILS.

'T'm sorry,' I said. 'I'm realy sorry. But I don't understand anything. I thought I was going to a photo shoot. What do my fingernails have to do with anything?'

'You're going to take part in a photo shoot with Mr Stark,' Kely said sharply. 'For a profile Vanity Fair is doing on him. You're the face of the new Stark - the young, vibrant Stark
- so of course he wants you in the shoot. You and Brandon, of course.'

Brandon's scowl had, if anything, only deepened at the sight of my tears.

'But,' I said. I couldn't believe I was crying. I really couldn't. I don't cry. I mean, except over important things, like Christopher thinking I'm dead.

This whole time, through this whole thing, I'd never once cried . . . except about Christopher. Not over the loss of my former body. Not over the loss of my former life. Not even over the loss of my former self.

Because up until that moment, I hadn't felt as if I'd lost my former self.

All it took, apparently, was one publicist yeling at me about my fingernails, however, to make me realize how very, very lost my former self really was.

It wasn't just the fingernails of course. Part of it was what had happened just before the fingernail abuse. The whole thing where I'd had to say goodbye to my parents, and how I'd left things with my sister - why hadn't I just been more supportive about the cheerleader thing? In retrospect, it wasn't that big a deal. Maybe cheerleading is a sport. They have gymnastics in the Olympics after all - and then I'd come out of the hospital and been besieged by photographers, all screaming someone else's name, but pointing their cameras at me, and
gotten into a limo with a guy who couldn't have been meaner to me and a publicist who

seemed to think everything I did and said was wrong . . .

This photo shoot was going to be a disaster. I could already tel.

'I can't do this,' I said, trying to hold back my tears. I didn't mean I couldn't do the Nikki

Howard thing. Obviously I couldn't do that.

And I definitely couldn't do this, what Kely wanted me to do. Because suddenly, I'd

remembered something. Something really important. And that was Lulu asking me if I knew

what a Manolo tip was. And I realized I didn't. I had no idea. Modeling, easy? How could I

have been Page 90 Meg Cabot: Airhead so arrogant? Why hadn't I read Frida's issues

doing COSMOgirl! more carefully?

'I - I don't remember how to do this!' I wailed.

'Wel, you'd better damned wel remember how,' Kely said in a hard voice.

'Because your

future is riding on it. Not to mention mine . . . and about thirty make-up artists,

stylists, art

directors, photographers, lighting technicians and personal assistants, all of whom are waiting

for you . . . and that's not including whoever they're bringing in to cater. You'd better get over

whatever it is you're going through, missy. People's jobs are depending on it.
We've been plenty patient this past month while you've been going through whatever it is you've been going through, but it's time to get back to work. Brandon, I told you, you leave that Red Bull alone.

You know how you get.'

'We're here,' Brandon said, pointing out of the window. 'And we've got company.'

Kely turned her head to look out of the window. Then she swore, and turned on her Stark-brand headpiece.

'Yeah, Rico?' she barked. 'Get security outside 520 Madison. We've got protestors. Again.'

I had no idea what she and Brandon were talking about. The truth was, I didn't really care.

I was still trying to absorb what Kely had just told me. I'd had no idea so many people depended on Nikki Howard for their livelihood. Sure, I'd known it was important to Stark Enterprises that she continue as the Face of Stark.

But I hadn't even begun to comprehend just what that entailed.

Until now.

Two million dollars? That was how much they'd paid for my brain transplant to keep Nikki alive? I was starting to think they'd gotten off cheap . . .
Then Kely was saying, 'Go. Go, go, go, go,' and she was shoving me out of the limo . . .

. . . and into the arms of a waiting security guard, who was trying to shield me from the

hordes of protestors gathered in front of the entrance to the massive Madison Avenue

skyscraper we'd just pulled up in front of.

'Hey,' I heard someone scream 'it's her!'

A second later, my shoulder was seized and I was spun around to face a woman holding a

sign on a stick that said, Stark Enterprises Kils!

'It's NIKKI HOWARD!' the woman - who I now saw was wearing combat fatigues and a

beret - blew a whistle, and all the other protestors surged towards me. The minute they saw

me, their faces contorted with anger.

'How do you justify being the public face of an organization that is putting the smal-

business owner out of work?' a man in overalls screamed at me, while a woman pushing a

baby in a stroller yelled, 'You're what's wrong with America!

I actually thought this was a little harsh, and not just because I wasn't who they thought I

was. Wel, technically.

But I didn't get a chance to tell them this, because the burly security guard was already
hustling me away from the hands that were reaching out, trying to clutch me. He more or less
barreled through the crowd, using his elbow as a battering ram, until we'd
ducked through a revolving door, into a vast, green-marble lobby, where we were joined a few seconds later by Brandon Stark and Kely Foster-Fielding.

'Good Lord,' Kely said, brushing herself off like a cat that's fur has been ruffled. 'They get worse every day.'

'Good to see you, Miss Howard,' the burly security guard who'd shielded me from the protesters' wrath said with a nod to me. 'Been a while.'

I smiled at him tremulously, my tears forgotten in my shock over what had just happened.

'Th-thanks . . .' 

'Martin,' he said to me with a toothy grin. 'You really did lose your memory, just like they said on the news!'

I was about to assure him I really had, when Kely grabbed my arm and said, 'Enough chit-chat, people, we're running late as it is. Let's go.'

And then I was being dragged towards an elevator. And I realized I was about to meet Mr Robert Stark himself.
Which was a relief. Because I realized I had a thing or two I wanted to say to him.

*Airhead*
Seventeen

Except that I didn't get to. Say what I wanted to say to Mr Stark, I mean. At least, not right away.

That's because the minute I stepped off the elevator into Stark Corporate headquarters, a swarm of hairstylists, make-up artists and wardrobe assistants descended on me. Kely snatched Cosabela away from me, assuring me she'd look after her for the duration of the shoot. And then I - not my dog - was the one swept away for grooming.

At first I didn't know what was happening. All I knew was that these total strangers were coming up to me, and this one guy kept puling on my hair and going, 'Honey, what happened?

They run out of product . . . on the entire island of Manhattan?'

And a woman kept peering into my face and being like, 'So . . . we're going for the natural look, are we?'

And this other woman grabbed my hand - this was all as I was being pulled down a hallway - and went, 'Yeah, it's as bad as Kely said. Get the dril file!'

Dril file? And were those product and natural look remarks of a snarky nature? They were. Soon I was being berated by Norman for my haircare technique ('So
we fal

and bump our heads and lose our memory, and suddenly we don't know how to deep

c Condition any more?') as well as my skincare regimen by Denise ('Honey, what happened to

that exfoliant I got you last month? You have to use it for it to actualy work."

and, of course,

my nail-biting ('No! Oh, for the love of God, no. Why would you do this? Why, why, why?"

by Doreen. It wasn't until the guy doing my hair gave it a bit too hard of a tug

and I was like,

'Ow!' and Norman was like, 'Oh, did the widdle baby get an owie?' with al this fake

sympathy, that I went, 'Yeah, actualy, I did,' and I grabbed his hand and ran it along the raised

scar at the base of my skul.

After that, he got very quiet . . . and much gentler. I don't know if Norman said something

to the others - he must have - because they stopped picking on me too. They also started

e xplaining to me what they were doing. Like the make-up lady - Denise - told me how it's

important to wash your face every night and every morning, and to use a gentle astringent to

really get Page 92 Meg Cabot: Airhead out the dirt. Then, if your skin was flaking, to use a
moisturizer . . . which of course I've never used before in my life, because my old skin never flaked, it only broke out from too much oil.

But apparently I have dry skin now.

And then Norman told me it was probably better not to wash my hair every day . . . that it was easier to style and more manageable if I only washed it two or three times a week. And he gave me some powder I was supposed to sprinkle into my hair every morning, and comb through, so it wouldn't ever look greasy.

And Doreen the nail lady applied a paste to each one of my nails that quickly hardened to a fake nail that she filed short, then painted black. Then she went, 'Bite them. Go on. Try.'

And when I stuck my nail into my mouth, I nearly broke a tooth on it.

'You'll never bite them again,' she said, 'so long as you wear these. You'll come see me twice a month so I can fill the gaps as they grow.'

And then drops were being put into my eyes to get the red out (and I was being gently chastised for crying) while the whole team tried to think of things to tell me that I might have forgotten, like that my skin is too sensitive to wax (like this was actualy something that was going to happen), so I have to shave unwanted body hair (including my bikini
line, about which

Norman said to me, 'You have to use a BRAND-NEW RAZOR every time,' which, helo,

was totally embarrassing. But also incredibly useful, considering what Kely had told me in the

car about the swimsuit-issue thing), and that processed foods aggravate acid reflux (like I

hadn't noticed), and that (more interestingly) Brandon and I were fully breaking up before my

accident because I was sick of him catting around with Mischa behind my back (fortunately

they told me this while Brandon wasn't in the room). None of them seemed to know that Nikki

had been catting around behind Brandon's back with her room-mate's boyfriend (thank God).

All this made the time pass very quickly, so I barely noticed my eyelashes were being

curled, and my hair straightened, and my toenails painted black to match my new fingernails,

and that they were even bleaching my arm hairs (yes).

Then they went, 'OK, off to wardrobe,' and I was sent to a (barely) curtained-off area of

the room where three tiny girls, each about a foot shorter than me, started taking off my

clothes (without even asking!) and making me put on new things . . . things I couldn't even
figure out HOW to put on, so it was a good thing they were there actualy, to help.

Then they would look at what I was in and one of them would take a Polaroid and run out

of the curtained area and then come back with a yes or no. Finally they settled on this

diaphanous white dress that was so low cut it would barely stay on, and these silver stilettos,

and no earrings, and finally I was let out of the curtained area and led down a long, plush
carpeted hallway, past a lot of stylishly dressed people who stared at me - up at me, mostly,

since I was so tall in my stilettos - and a few of whom said, 'Hi, Nikki.' I tried to say hi back,

but whenever I did, I'd get a shocked look. I guess Nikki wasn't known for being particularly

friendly while on a shoot.

Which I could sort of see why, considering how people poked and pulled her.

Then finally I was led up to a door that had the words ROBERT STARK, CEO written

on them in silver letters. And the door was thrown open and I was in Mr Stark's office at last.

Except that Mr Stark's office was in total chaos because of the photo shoot. There were

power cords running criss-crossed all along the carpet, and giant klieg lights set up all over the
place, shining down hotly on everyone, and skinny guys in black shirts and jeans everywhere,

and girls in ponytails with fancy glasses holding cups of latte, and big blackout cloths draped

over the floor-to-ceiling windows that must have offered a panoramic view of all of Manhattan.

And in the centre of it all was a huge mahogany desk, at which sat Robert Stark in a white

shirt unbuttoned about six inches to reveal a lot of grey chest hair. And behind him stood his

son, also wearing a white shirt open to reveal his completely hairless chest. Both men looked

tanned (thanks, I knew from Denise, to bronzer, which she'd also smeared all over me - and I

mean, all over . . . there is apparently no room for modesty in modeling) and handsome in the

lights. Robert Stark, though, looked impatient, while his son just looked bored.

I was getting ready to go up and introduce myself and ask if we could have a word

together in private - because maybe if Mr Stark met me and saw what I was like, he might

reconsider the whole making my parents pay back the two million dollars if I didn't honour

Nikki's contract with Stark . . . and also might tell me why he'd given Nikki a computer that

was loaded with keystroke-monitoring software.
But just as I was about to take a step in Mr Stark's direction, someone grabbed me and
wrapped me in a fierce hug.

'There you are!' cried a woman's voice - gravely, and big, to match the hug. 'Oh, my God,
I can't believe how long it's been! I wanted to come see you in the hospital, but they had those
damned family visitation-only restrictions! But I'm her agent! I'm family, I told them. No deal.

Wel, let me look at you.'

I was held at arm's length while a dark-haired middle-aged woman, whippet-thin, in a
cream-coloured skirt suit examined me from head to foot.

'Gorgeous, as always,' she concluded when she was done checking me out. 'Couldn't be
more gorgeous. Oh, but you don't have the foggiest idea who I am, do you? You really did get
a bump on the head!'

'Um,' I said, glancing past the woman at Robert Stark, who was complaining to someone
about the cufflinks on his tuxedo shirt, which appeared to keep coming undone. 'You're
Rebecca, my agent?'

'That's right, that's right!' She flung her arms around me again. 'Rebecca Lowel! Thank
God you're all right. If anything had happened to you . . . wel, I don't know what
I'd have done!

'Run straight back to that trailer park in the Ozarks to see if she could find someone else to
pluck from obscurity,' said a man in leather trousers with a pencil moustache drily.

'Oh, hush,' Rebecca said to the leather trousers man. To me, she said, 'I know this is
probably al very overwhelming. But you've always been a natural and I know you'll snap back
in no time. And speaking of being a natural . . . how excited are you about SI?
Oh, Nikki,
when I heard, my heart . . . wel, I just thought I'd cry'

'Step away from the talent, Rebecca,' Pencil Moustache said. 'Now that she's here we can
finally get to work.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, Raoul,' Rebecca said, stil hanging on to me. 'It's just that when I think how
close she came to death-

I wondered how she'd react if I told her her client Nikki really had died. Just not legally in
the state of New York.

'Yes, wel, I'll take good care of her for now, Bec.' The man she'd caled Raoul took me
by the arm and said, 'We've met before, Nikki, but you don't remember, I see. Which is a
crushing blow from which I doubt I'll soon recover. Never mind. Hop up on to this desk here

so Pete can check the lighting -'

Obediently, I hopped up on to the enormous mahogany desk - after first checking to make

sure my diaphanous dress was covering everything it was supposed to be covering. Which it

wasn't doing the world's best job of. My nipples were kind of showing . . .

'Yes, yes,' Raoul said, totally noticing what Page 94 Meg Cabot: Airhead I thought I was

doing so subtly. 'Never mind that now, we've al seen it before. Now rol over and stick your

heels in the air - elbows up, chin in your hands - Norman, hair.' Norman darted forward to

arrange my hair as I let Raoul twist me into a completely uncomfortable - even painful -

position on the desk. 'Yes, that's better. Al right, gentlemen, places.'

I couldn't see what was going on behind me, because I was trying to hold my painful pose.

But I suppose Mr Stark and his son went back to their places, since Raoul said, 'Good, good.

Let's take some Polaroids.'

Wel, I thought to myself as the photographer, Gwen, started snapping away. This isn't so

bad. Why had Lulu laughed so much when I asked how hard modeling can be? It's not
exactly difficult . . . although my neck kind of hurts. And I think there's some mascara in my eye. And -

'Nikki, Nikki,' Raoul said. 'Can you try not to look like you're in pain? I know you are, darling, but don't think about it. Think about lovely things, wil you? Lovely thoughts, lovely face -'

I realized with horror that I'd been grimacing. I immediately plastered a huge smile on to my face.

'Not quite that lovely, Nikki,' Raoul intoned. 'This isn't a Sears portrait studio. Relax your mouth. Think dewy . . . Denise, can you make her lips more dewy? There. There. Now, a few more -'

And then Raoul and everyone gathered around to look at the Polaroids as they developed.

So I started to sit up. Now, I thought, would be the perfect time to speak to Mr Stark -

'Nikki, darling,' Rebecca caled sweetly from somewhere beyond the circle of white light thrown by the kliegs, so I couldn't see her, 'where do you think you're going?'

'Um,' I said. 'To change back into my real clothes?'

'The shoot's not over,' I heard Brandon say with a smirk. 'It hasn't even begun.'
'But -' I looked at the dozens of Polaroids now being dropped indifferently to the floor.

'Test shots,' Brandon said. 'God. What, did you get a little too much wind between your ears riding around on the back of that scrub's scooter?'

I bristled. 'For your information, Gabriel Luna is a very hard-working singer-songwriter, and not a scrub . . . unlike some people I could mention.'

Brandon stuck out his chin. 'Hey,' he said. 'For your information, I've got several production deals in the works right now . . . not to mention I'm recording my own album.'

Yeah, I wanted to snarl. With your dad's money. But I didn't dare, with his father standing right there. Checking his emails on his - non-Stark-brand - Blackberry, but stil. He could have been listening.

Knowing what I knew about Nikki's computer, I didn't doubt he was.

'No bickering, children,' Rebecca caled from the darkness beyond the desk. 'And Raoul will tel you when you can relax, Nikki,'

And that's when I began to realize why Lulu had laughed at me when I'd said modeling was easy.

There is nothing easy about it.

Unless you think it's easy trying to look Page 95 Meg Cabot: Airhead dewy and
think

lovely thoughts while twisting your body into the most uncomfortable position possible at the

same time you're trying not to mess up your make-up or expose a nipple while wearing five-
inch heel shoes and trying not to notice how incredibly hot your jerk of an ex-boyfriend is.

Because allow me to assure you, it's not.

Especially when you're doing it for the first time, and in somebody else's body.

Airhead
Eighteen

It was nearly two hours later before Raoul got enough shots he thought he could use. I had
to do a bunch more different poses. Some of them involved me biting into a big red apple.

That was fake. And tasted like dirt.

Another pose I had to do involved hanging off Brandon Stark’s shoulders like I was one of
those baby rhesus monkeys, clinging to their mothers. I said I thought that pose was kind of
misogynistic, because it implied that women are helpless and need a big strong man to support
them.

I mostly just said that because draping myself over Brandon that way reminded me of how
fun kissing him had been, and made me want to kiss him again, which, considering how mad he
was at me about Gabriel - and the fact that I'm crushing on someone else entirely - didn't seem
like it would be the best idea.

Raoul didn't take my advice anyway though. And Rebecca took me aside and asked if I
had a fever.

'Because normally you know better than to criticize an art director's vision,' she said.
I pointed out to her that the media is notorious for infantilizing women in their images of us,

and asked if it didn't bother her, as a feminist, that she was partly contributing to that.

She looked at me and went, 'Are you taking any kind of medication for your head injury?

Because if so they need to up the dosage.'

I could sort of see her point. I mean, if I didn't do the pose, they'd just hire some other model to do it.

Still, it was totally embarrassing having to smush my boobs up against Brandon like that.

Not that he seemed to mind . . .

That was the problem. My embarrassment aside, I didn't mind much either.

And I think Brandon started to get over his being mad at me about the whole riding-on-the-back-of-Gabriel-Luna's-Vespa thing, because after about half an hour of my smushing my boobs into his back, he whispered, 'Hey What are you doing after this?'

I was caught totally caught off guard, and asked, 'Who? Me?'

'No,' Brandon said very sarcastically. 'I'm talking to Pete, the lighting guy. Of course you.'

'Oh,' I said. 'I don't know. I guess I'm just going back to the loft. Why?'
'Cool,' Brandon said. 'Maybe I'll stop by.'

I felt myself starting to blush. I didn't know a whole lot about guys, but I knew what Maybe I'll stop by meant. Or at least, I was pretty sure I did. Considering where my boobs were.

I had a good idea where they'd be later too. I was positive I wasn't going to be able to stop them from being there. Not if I knew Nikki. Or at least, how she got when guys started kissing her. They tossed the word wanton around a lot in those romance novels Frida - and, OK, I have to admit, I - liked to read.

Wel, wanton pretty much summed up how Nikki got whenever a guy stuck his tongue in her mouth.

OK. My mouth. But what about Christopher? I mean, he was the one I really loved, and I'd never even once managed to get within kissing distance of him . . .

Oh God. This was all so confusing.

I tried to think up some excuse as to why Brandon shouldn't stop by the loft later, and finally seized upon a perfect one.

'The thing is,' I whispered, 'I'm going to bed early. I've got school in the morning.'
Brandon made a face - until Gwen, the photographer, asked him to please stop.
'School?

You're kidding me, right?'

'No,' I said. 'Tribeca Alternative High School. My first day. I want to be nice and wel
rested. And, wel, you know. What with the accident, and al-

'I thought the school thing was just a PR stunt,' Brandon said.

I jerked my boobs off him in shock. 'A PR stunt? Who said that?'

'Nikki,' Gwen caled, 'don't move, please! Pete's just adjusting the lighting -'

'Wel,' Brandon said, 'that's what people are saying -'

'Education is necessary for anyone to grow as an individual,' I said. 'I'm going to school so
I can go to college some day, not as a PR stunt.' And not just so I can check up on my best
friend, who I happen to be crushing on, and make sure he hasn't found some other girl, either.

'Kely!' Gwen yeled.

'Nikki,' Kely caled to me, 'could you get back in your place, please?'

I got back in my place, draped over Brandon's back. But I wasn't happy about it. People
were saying Nikki Howard was going to high school as a PR stunt? That was terrible! And so
untrue! I could see I needed to speak to Brandon's father, now more than ever. He couldn't
keep the truth about what had really happened to Nikki to himself now. He just
couldn't. It

wasn't fair.

But it was realy hard to get Mr Stark's attention, because every time he wasn't posing for

the cameras, he was on his (non-Stark-brand) cellphone yeling at someone, or
teling one of

the many people in the room to get him someone else's phone number, or an espresso. Finaly,

after what seemed like another five hours - my feet were throbbing, and my mouth muscles

twitching from smiling so much - Raoul said, 'That's a wrap, people! You can al
go home!'

And Mr Stark said, 'Thank God,' and started taking out his cufflinks. I was sitting right on

the desk in front of him, so I just went, 'Mr Stark? Can I talk to you a minute?'

And he looked down at me, and went, 'No.'

Seriously! Just like that!

But I'm not a straight-A student - and haven't gotten to level forty-five in

Journeyquest -

for nothing. I mean, I'm no quitter.

And not even a bilionaire corporate executive who also runs an underground brain-

transplant clinic is going to thwart me.

'It's just . . .' I said in a low voice as everyone around us was gathering up power
cords
and taking down the blackout curtains. 'Don't you think what you're doing is wrong? I mean, about Nikki.'

He looked right at me. His eyes, I noticed, were brown, with tiny ruby glints in them. Or maybe that was just the way they looked in the klieg lights, which were being turned off, one by one.

'Don't get me wrong,' I went on quickly. 'I'm totally grateful for what Doctor Holcombe did for me. And I am totally willing to go through with my end of the contract. But don't you think Nikki's friends - her family - deserve to know the truth? So they can mourn her properly? I mean, some people even think she was in rehab last month. How unfair is that? I'm sure once they understand your issue with the whole thing, they'll get it. It's just that you can't go around replacing one person with a completely different one, you know. It's not right. I know Nikki might have been a model and all, but that doesn't mean she didn't have a unique personality and people who loved her. And, I'm not sure you're aware of this, but someone loaded that computer you gave her with keystroke-tracking software-' 'JESSICA!' Mr Stark startled me by yelling.
One of the ponytailed girls in the fancy glasses came scurrying up. 'Yes, sir?'

'Jessica, get my coat. Is my reservation at Per Se al set?'

'Yes, sir,' Jessica said, trailing after her boss as he strode away from me. 'And your car's

waiting downstairs -'

It was only then that I realized: Robert Stark was walking away from me! He was just

walking away from me, as if I hadn't said anything! As if I was just . . . not even there! As if I

was just . . . just . . .

An airhead model.

'But - Mr Stark!' I called after him.

But Robert Stark just kept going, walking out of his office without so much as a second

glance at me. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe how he'd just walked away like that. The

one person I thought could help me - or not even me so much as Nikki - and he'd just

completely ignored me, as if I was a fly. Or a busboy.

Or a girl.

'Don't even bother,' a deep voice behind me advised.

I turned around and found myself looking up at Brandon. Brandon was staring after his

father with a look I can only describe as . . . wel. Not very friendly.
'He doesn't speak to the talent,' Brandon informed me.

I stared at him in confusion. 'The talent? You mean . . .'

Me. I'm the talent.

'Or to me,' Brandon added bitterly, 'if he can help it. He's much too busy and important.'

'But.' I shook my head, not sure I understood. 'He's your dad. Of course he can't be too busy for you.'

Brandon gave me a strange look. Then he said, 'You really do have amnesia, don't you?'

And with that, he turned around and walked away before I could say another word.

I was on my way back to the changing area to slip into my own clothes, when I ran into

Rebecca and Kely.

'Darling, you were fabulous!' Rebecca cried.

'I wasn't,' I said to her. My neck still throbbed from the way Raoul had made me arch it. 'I didn't know what I was doing. And Mr Stark hates me.' Although, truthfully, I wasn't sure that

was such a bad thing . . .

'So you're a little rusty,' Rebecca said with a shrug. 'You hit your head! That we should all

look so good after concussion. And Bob Stark hates everybody. Uh, this is ringing -' She held
out the cellphone my mom had given to me. It was flashing my home number. My mom was calling, no doubt about dinner. I realized I hadn't folowed her directions and caled as soon as I'd gotten to the photo shoot.

I let it go to voicemail. 'I'l cal her back,' I said. I didn't think I could handle my mom and all her questions - and concerns - just then.

'Great,' Rebecca said. 'Now, Kely and I want to take you out for dinner to celebrate the SI gig. We got your favourite table at Nobu. We'l make it a ladies' night . . . unless Brandon wants to come?'

I glanced over my shoulder at Brandon, who was already on his way to the elevators.

'Uh, Brandon's got other plans,' I said. 'And actualy, I'm realy tired. I think I'm just going to head back to the loft and crash, if that's OK. I mean, I just got out of the hospital this morning, and I've got school in the morning-'

'Say no more,' Rebecca said with a smile. 'We'l do it another time. Tomorrow afternoon, after the Ele shoot, perhaps.'

'Tomorrow?' I stared at her. 'We have a shoot tomorrow?'

'Honey, you are booked solid al this week,' Kely said, thrusting Cosabela into my arms.
'You are on fire, you're so hot right now. Are you sure you don't want to reconsider this going-back-to-school thing? Because it's really cutting into your availability-

'No,' I said. 'I mean, yes. I mean, I have to go to school' I wanted to. How else was I going to find out if Christopher was into me at all? Oh, and get an education?

Kely shook her head. 'This school thing's gonna kill me,' she grumbled. And a second later she was barking into her headset, 'No! I told you! She's not available until after three p.m.

What part of three p.m. did you not understand?'

'Well, I think it's great,' Rebecca said to me. 'Christy Turlington ended up studying comparative religion and eastern philosophy at NYU, you know. If she can do it, you can.

Although, how smart could she be if she thought Fashion Cafe would ever take off?'

'Um,' I said, because I had no idea what she was talking about, 'I should go . . .' 'Of course you should.' Rebecca took me by the arm and started steering me back to the changing area. 'Girls! Nikki has to go!'

And, like magic, a few seconds later, I had been stripped of my ethereal dress and stilettos, and was back in my own clothes, in a limo heading back downtown - by myself, this time. And in my lap - besides Cosabella - was something Rebecca had handed me
on my way
out.

'Oh,' she'd said. 'Here. I've been meaning to give you this.'

And she'd passed me a bronze-leather tote marked Prada, that caused my shoulder to
sag, it was so heavy.

'What's this?' I'd asked curiously.

'Hon,' Rebecca had said with a laugh. 'It's your purse! You dropped it the day of the
accident. I've been holding it for you. Your life is in there. Your Sidekick, your
celphone, your
credit cards . . . hold on to it this time, al right, honey?'

Now, in the limo, I dumped the contents of Nikki Howard's bag into my lap and
marveled
at what I found there.

I'd suspected before. But now I knew for sure.

I was rich.

Nikki Howard had a platinum American Express card, two gold Visas, a gold
Mastercard, a platinum Chase bank card for quick ATM withdrawals, tons of
cash (four
hundred and twenty-seven dolars' worth), and a chequebook that said she had
three hundred
and six thousand, six hundred and thirty-two dolars and eleven cents in her
savings account,
and twenty-two thousand dollars in her current account.

And that was just what was in her bank account. Who knew what she had invested?

Because I found a business card for a Smith Barney investment adviser that was tattered and looked well used.

I was freaking loaded. Not enough to buy myself out of my Stark contract. But I could help my parents out if they ran into problems. This was awesome.

The first thing I did (after admiring Nikki’s neatly balanced chequebook) was check out her cellphone. But, like the one my mom had given me, it was Stark-brand. Same thing for the Sidekick. The batteries of both were dead from having gone without use for so long, so it wasn’t like I could turn them on to check (and even if I had, I wouldn’t have been able to tel myself. Only the Commander would have been able to know for sure). But I suspected they, like Nikki’s laptop, might have been tapped.

Maybe I was just being paranoid. But waking up in someone else's body can do that to a girl.

The rest of Nikki’s bag seemed to contain only makeup and half empty containers of acid-reflux medication. But it was comforting to know I had some money at least. Al
I wanted to
do when I got to the loft was order some takeout for dinner (which I could now pay for - and
I didn't feel guilty about using Nikki's money, because after that photo shoot, I felt like I'd
earned it), strip off my clothes, take a long, hot bath, maybe watch some TV and go to bed.
And now I could pay the delivery guy. And pick up a bagel or whatever for breakfast on
my way to school in the morning.
But when I arrived at the loft five minutes later, I saw my plan for a quiet dinner and a nice
bubble bath in Nikki's jacuzzi go down the drain . . . pretty much literally. Because when the
elevator doors opened to let me and Cosabela out into Nikki's place, a dozen people -
including Lulu and Brandon - yeled, 'Welcome home, Nikki!' threw streamers, popped
champagne Page 100 Meg Cabot: Airhead corks and rushed to hug me.
Yeah. I was surprised, al right. Especially since the person hugging me the hardest turned
out to be Justin Bay.

Airhead
Nineteen

We were at a club called Cave. It was called Cave because it was in the bowels of New York City, in a part of the subway system that the city had planned and then abandoned due to lack of funds nearly a century earlier. Someone had installed spotlights along the rock walls in strategic places, strung a sound system through it, put a couple of DJs in place, and now it was the hottest dance spot in Manhattan. There was a line out of the door that went halfway around the block, even on a Wednesday night. You couldn't get in unless you were somebody.

Nikki Howard, it turned out, was somebody. Even though she was only seventeen and not legally allowed into bars.

But it was all right, because Nikki didn't drink. I found this out from the bartender when I wearily approached the bar, parched from so much dancing, and he said, 'Hey Nikki, long time no see. The usual?'

'I have amnesia,' I said. It seemed to me I'd been saying this to people all night long, as they approached me and cried, Nikki, it's me! Don't you remember me? It's Joey/Jimmy/Johnny/Jan from Paris/Denmark/East Hampton/Los Angeles!
'Didn't you hear? I don't know what the usual is.'

The bartender took a long-stemmed cocktail glass, filed it with water, added a curled piece of orange peel, then slid it towards me. If you didn't know it was just water, it looked exactly like a Martini, only with orange peel instead of an olive.

'We call it the Nikki,' he said with a wink. 'Only the bartenders in town know it's just water. You can't drink alcohol because of your stomach problems, remember? And because you're not twenty-one of course,' he added piously.

I grinned. I was kind of starting not to be so annoyed with Nikki Howard . . . something I wouldn't have thought earlier in the day.

'Thanks,' I said gratefully, and sipped Nikki's signature drink while I surveyed the dance floor. I couldn't believe it was so late - nearly two in the morning - and the club was still so crowded (and only getting more and more crowded) on a week night. Of course, I had never been to a place like this before. Maybe they were always like this. Here at the bar, there was barely a seat available. I had only gotten mine because a galant fan had surrendered his (in exchange for an autograph of course. The first time someone had asked, I had
almost

written Em Watts, but changed it to Nikki Howard at the last minute. I'd been so swamped by

autograph seekers al night, I'd actualy gotten almost used to it).

Out on the dance floor, bodies were gyrating to hypnotic techno, and different-coloured

flashes of lights and thick clouds of dry ice made it impossible to tel who was who. I knew

Lulu was out there somewhere, along with both Brandon and Justin and a ton more of Nikki

Howard's 'best' friends (she'd colected more and more as the evening wore on). We had

begun the evening at the loft, then moved on to a boisterous dinner at one of Bobby Flay's

restaurants (and the Food Network chef had actualy been there and come over to our table to

wish me - I mean, Nikki - a speedy recovery from my amnesia), then ended up at Cave.

Lulu had been so excited about the surprise Page 101 Meg Cabot: Airhead party she'd

thrown together for me, I hadn't had the heart to tel her I wasn't exactly in the mood for a

party. I'd tried to go along with the whole thing, even letting her drag me off into Nikki's closet

and choose an outfit for me to wear for the evening.

Which was why I was sitting at one of the many bars in Cave in black spiked
ankle boots,
a low-cut black top, and a gold lamé miniskirt. I looked just like a hooker I'd seen once down
on the West Side Highway. Though I hadn't wanted to hurt Lulu's feelings by saying so.

Especially since the hooker had been a man.

'Aren't you having fun?' Lulu bounded up from out of the dry ice smoke to ask me
suddenly. She was in a contrasting outfit of gold lamé ankle boots and top and black skirt.

She'd teased both our hair out to stand about five inches from our heads. She was
calling it

Eighties Night.

The only problem was, we were the only two in the entire club in eighties attire.

'I sure am,' I told her. Then I added, 'But, you know, I have to go home soon, Lulu,
because I have school in the morning.'

Lulu's tiny mouth popped open like a baby bird's.

'Oh my God,' she cried. 'I forgot! That's right, you're doing that school thing. You
must, like, totally hate me.'

'I don't,' I assured her. The truth was, out of all the people I'd met since waking up in
Nikki Howard's body, she was my favourite. Brandon was still acting angry with me over
Gabriel, and Justin, of course, was giving me the cold shoulder because Lulu was around (for which I was grateful. I didn't want to talk to him anyway). I didn't know who the other people were - Lulu had introduced them, but their names and how Nikki was supposed to know them had gone right over my head. None of them had turned out to be having secret affairs with me (or rather, Nikki), much to my relief . . .

But while they all seemed pleasant enough, they just kept talking about people I didn't know, and I mostly just felt left out and . . . well, pretty lonely, despite all the autograph seekers (and the fact that my mom kept calling, even though I was still sending her calls to voicemail. Why did she have to be so clingy? I was sixteen and a half, I could take care of myself) and people who evidently knew and adored Nikki Howard, who kept coming up and gushing over her.

Being adored was great. It really was.

But it had been a long day, and I just wanted to go back to the loft and get some sleep.

Was that so wrong?

'What's up with this school thing anyway?' Lulu wanted to know, smiling flirtatiously at a
guy who surrendered his barstool for her - seriously, it was amazing what guys would do for a pretty girl. It was a whole different world, being gorgeous; a world with which I was entirely unfamiliar - then hopping on to it and signaling the bartender for a drink. 'I mean, why do you want to go to school so badly?'

'Because,' I said. No way was I telling her about Christopher, and I decided it would be wiser to keep my mouth shut about Frida too, 'I want to go to college some day.'

'College?' Lulu made a face. 'What for?'

'So I can get a job,' I said. 'Teaching, probably. Both my parents are professors, and I'd like to be one too.' Then, realizing what I'd said, I blanched. 'I mean -'

But Lulu just waved my statement aside. She was still convinced her spirit-transfer explanation, not my amnesia story, was the correct one for Nikki Howard's bizarre recent behaviour.

'Teaching what?' The bartender had brought her a drink without her even specifying what she wanted. Lulu's signature drink was something yellowish that had green leaves floating in it and some crystals along the rim. When I tasted one that had fallen on the bar, I found that it was sugar.
'I'm not sure,' I said. 'I like a lot of subjects. That's another reason why I want to go back to school. To figure it out.' Then I had an idea. 'Hey, you should come with me!

Lulu nearly choked on her drink. 'Wh-what?'

'You should,' I said, getting excited by the idea. 'I'm sure your dad could get you in. He's super famous. TAHS would be so excited to have you. Come with me tomorrow!'

Lulu made another face. 'Um . . . thanks, but no thanks.'

I shook my head. 'Lulu,' I said, 'you're only seventeen. You should be in school. You shouldn't even be living by yourself. Why do you live alone anyway?'

She looked up at me, her elfin face twisted with confusion.

'I don't live alone,' Lulu said. 'I live with you.'

'I know,' I said. 'But I mean why don't you live with your parents?'

'Because my mom took off with my snowboard instructor and wants nothing to do with me, silly,' Lulu said cheerfully, 'and my dad's new wife is five years older than I am. How stoked would you be to live at home in that situation?'

And with that, she polished off her drink, jumped off the stool and jetted back off to the dance floor, leaving me alone at the bar.

Only not for long, because a second later, Justin Bay slithered on to the stool she'd
vacated and went, 'So you honestly expect me to believe you don't remember anything
- anything - about us . . . and Paris?'

I looked at the bartender and he slid another Nikki special towards me.

'You shouldn't be talking to me,' I said to Justin. 'You're Lulu's boyfriend. And no, I don't

remember anything. That's what the word amnesia means. Memory loss. It's Greek for

forgetfulness.'

'Oooh,' Justin said, wrapping his arm around my waist and leaning his face down to nuzzle

my neck. 'One bang on the head and you're Miss Smarty Pants, aren't you? And you know

good and wel that I can trigger your memory, if anyone can . . . '

It was amazing. My body's reaction to his warm lips on my neck was instantaneous. I felt

like an electric current went up and down my spine. Only it was not unpleasant.

The thing was, Lulu was dancing not twenty feet away.

What happened next was as instantaneous as the reaction of my skin to his lips.

And that was that I dumped the contents of the cocktail glass the bartender had just slid

towards me on to Justin's head.

All the people around us hooted with surprise as Justin sputtered and leaped off the bar

stool. To say he seemed astonished would be an
understatement. He looked completely horrified - the more so when he licked his dripping lips.

'You're drinking water?' he cried.

'It's called a Nikki,' I said grandly, slipping off my bar stool. 'I don't do alcohol. Or other people's boyfriends. And don't you forget it.'

I stalked away to the sound of applause.

I found Lulu dancing with three other girls, all of whom were dressed in the height of eighties chic as well. It was if she'd sent out some secret coded message before we'd even left the loft. Here I was, one of the world's hottest supermodels, and I stil didn't get how girls did that. Figured out what to wear, I mean.

'Lulu,' I shouted at her, to be heard over the incredibly loud music, 'I'm going home. You can stay if you want, but I just wanted you to know, I'm leaving.'

Lulu stopped dancing and stared at me.

'No,' she said, shaking her wild-looking hair. 'We never leave without the other person. If you're leaving I'm leaving too. Let me just go tel Justin.'

'Uh,' I yeled, 'Justin's kind of . . . mad right now.'

'Oh,' Lulu said, comprehension dawning instantly. 'Has he been hitting on you?'

Now it was my turn to stare. 'You knew?'
Lulu roled her huge eyes. 'Duh. I know Nikki has a problem saying no to boys when they start kissing her . . . and also that boys have a problem saying no to kissing Nikki. But I thought that first part might have been cleared up by the spirit transfer.'

'Wel, I said no,' I said uncomfortably. 'And now he's mad.'

I felt absurd standing there on the dance floor, having this conversation . . . especially since some guy who was wearing a ton of gold chains and very big trousers that showed off a lot of his underwear danced up and started grinding on me.

'Aren't you Nikki Howard?' he asked me.

'No,' I said to him. Then I turned back to Lulu. 'You mean, you knew this whole time?'

'I suspected,' Lulu said with a shrug. 'But look, it's not like Justin and I ever had this big love connection. He just always gives me really nice presents whenever he hooks up with someone else. And ever since you got back from the shows in Paris, there've been a lot of really nice presents.'

'I'm so sorry,' I said, meaning it. I felt terrible. Even though it wasn't my fault. It was Nikki's.

And I wasn't Nikki. Or at least, I hadn't been at the time she'd done the terrible things that
had hurt Lulu.

'You are too Nikki Howard,' Big Pants insisted, dancing up on me again. 'Damn, girl! You

are one fine piece -'

I turned, placed my hand in the centre of his chest as he ground his pelvis against my leg,

and pushed him down.

'It's al right,' Lulu said, stepping neatly over Big Pants as he sprawled across the dance

floor. 'You realy can't help it. It's like you're powerless over Page 104 Meg Cabot: Airhead

kissing. Anyway, if we're leaving, we should probably get Brandon. Last time I saw him he

was - Oh, there he is. See, this isn't good.'

Lulu pointed. Brandon was in the DJ's booth, arguing with the DJ about something.

'I'l get him,' I said, and hurried over just in time to hear Brandon saying, 'You never want

to play my songs, man. Why is that?'

The DJ's reply was calm, but brutal. 'Because your songs suck.'

Brandon puled back his arm as if he was going to punch the DJ in the face. I flung myself

forward and grabbed his arm, throwing al my body weight on to it so that he staggered

backwards with me.
'What're you doing?' he demanded, his words drunkenly slurred. 'Did you hear what this
guy just said? I'm gonna take him out.'

'No, you're not,' I assured him. 'We have to go now.'

'I can't go now,' Brandon said, trying to shake me off. 'I gotta kil this guy first.'

'No,' I said, digging my stiletto heels into the grout of the tiled floor to keep him
from
moving forward. 'Brandon, you can't. We gotta go. The limo's waiting for us-'

'Good,' Brandon said, dragging me inexorably forward. 'I'll be there in a minute. Soon as
I've kiled this guy.'

Not knowing what else to do - but knowing I had to distract him somehow - I
gave a sort
of leap, keeping one arm wrapped around Brandon's arm and throwing the other
around his
neck, and clamped my mouth over his.

As I'd hoped, Brandon's reflexes weren't too badly affected by alcohol for him
not to
catch me the moment I leaped into his arms. And he became too preoccupied
with kissing me
to remember his animosity towards the DJ. Kissing realy is wonderful that way. I
almost
forgot myself that I was doing it just to get Brandon to quit wanting to fight . . .

. . . until, that is, someone standing close by cleared his throat, and I dragged my
lips away
from Brandon's and saw Gabriel Luna standing there staring at us, holding a CD in his hand

and looking vaguely bemused.

'Oh,' I said, colour rushing into my face. I was, after al, being held in the air by Brandon

Stark. Although at least this time he hadn't slung me over his shoulder, fireman style, like when

he'd stuffed me into the limo the night he and Lulu kidnapped me. 'Hi.'

'Uh,' Gabriel said. 'Helo. Everything al right?'

'Oh,' I said, trying to sound breezy. 'Yes. We were just leaving. Brandon, you can put me

down now.'

'No,' Brandon said sulenly as he stared at Gabriel, apparently recognizing him from the

grainy photo of the two of us on Gabriel's Vespa that had been al over the place the day

before.

'Ha.' I gave a nervous laugh, and tried to smile my dewiest at Gabriel. 'He's kidding. Put

me down now, Brandon.'

'No,' Brandon said again.

I closed my eyes briefly, praying there wouldn't now be a fight between Gabriel and

Brandon.

But I needn't have worried. Because of course Gabriel doesn't like me that way,
considering the fact that he thinks Nikki Howard is a recovering addict and al. When I opened

my eyes again, he was stil gazing at me with that same bemused Page 105 Meg Cabot:

Airhead expression.

And Lulu had come up behind him and was scowling.

'God, what is taking so long?' she demanded, in a surprisingly loud voice. She looked like

a five-foot-tal angry general. 'The car's waiting, you guys. Move it, or lose it!'

Obediently Brandon folowed her, not seeming to notice that he was stil carrying me. Not

knowing what else to do, I waved goodbye to Gabriel from over Brandon's broad shoulder.

Gabriel waved back - then seemed to catch himself and lowered his hand, looking around as

several people standing nearby cried, 'Oh my God - that's Nikki Howard!' One or two rushed

up to ask for my autograph, but Brandon just grunted and kept walking, not pausing even for a

moment.

Being carried out of the hottest dance club in Manhattan at two in the morning by Nikki

Howard's on-again, off-again boyfriend wasn't too embarrassing. Especialy when we

encountered about nine thousand paparazzi on the sidewalk between the front of the club and
the waiting doors of our limo. That was especialy nice. I mean, not.

'Great,' I said, after Brandon had dumped me inside the car and I'd straightened out my
skirt, which had hiked up past my hips. 'You know what that looked like, right?'

'What?' Lulu asked blearily as she reapplied her lip-gloss.

'Like I was too drunk to walk and Brandon was carrying me out of there.'

'So?' Lulu admired her own reflection in the Swarovski crystal-encrusted compact she was
holding. 'You didn't know any better than to drink too much. You forgot. You have amnesia.

Remember? God, that's the perfect excuse for everything.' She looked up from the compact.

'Oh, no, wait . . . how could you remember that? You have amnesia.'

Brandon, who'd piled into the limo after us, chose that moment to colapse on top of me.

'Your place or mine?' he asked my stomach.

'Oh my God, get off,' I said, giving him a shove. 'I'm not going to your place and you're not
staying at mine. I don't even like you that way I only kissed you to keep you from getting your
face smashed in by that DJ. You're in no condition to be fighting anyone.'

'You're nice,' he said, not moving an inch and, in fact, snuggling more deeply into my lap.

'You're much nicer than you used to be, before you hit your head and scrambled your brains.
You were so mean before. Remember, Lulu? When Nikki was so mean al the time?'

Lulu snapped open her bag and put her lipgloss away, cocking her head to study me thoughtfully. 'She is a lot less bitchy,' she said. 'It must be because of the spirit transfer.'

'I don't care why it is,' Brandon said, sighing happily as he hugged my bely. 'I'm just glad she's back. And so much nicer.' A few seconds later, he let out a gentle snore.

I threw Lulu a helpless look, like, What am I supposed to do now?

'Just push him off when we get home,' she said with a shrug of her razor-sharp shoulder blades. 'He won't wake up. Tom'l take him back to his place on Charles Street. It's not like he'll remember any of this tomorrow. He never does.'

'He does this a lot?' I asked, glancing down Page 106 Meg Cabot: Airhead at Brandon's handsome, peacefully dozing face.

Lulu looked at me blankly. 'He likes to party,' she said.

I could see that she had no idea what I was talking about - also that she was beginning to nod off herself, every bit as tired as I was. I was going to have to get to the bottom of the Brandon problem some day soon, I knew.

But not tonight. Tonight, I just wanted to go to bed.
Which I did, the minute we got home, carefully setting Nikki’s alarm for seven o'clock -

giving me a grand total of four-hours' sleep - so I could get to school on time.

Wel, I guess no one had said it was going to be easy, this balancing high school with a ful-
time modeling career. I had no idea how I was going to pul it off.

Al I knew was that I had to, if I was going to establish any kind of normality to my new

life.

Normality. When I had Nikki Howard's face and Emerson Watts's brain. Right. Because

that had been working out just great so far.

Airhead
Twenty

I could see that the Walking Dead were in fine form when the cab I'd been lucky to snag

let me off in front of TAHS the next morning. They were al leaning up against the chain-link

fence around the construction site across the street (because why have a high school if it isn't

across the street from a former thread factory they've imploded to make room for more

condos, so you can listen to the BEEP BEEP BEEP of trucks backing up al day?), text-
messaging one another.

Al but Whitney Robertson and Jason Klein. They were making out.

I felt some throw up come into my mouth, just looking at them.

But it might have been the Danish I'd snagged at deli near the loft and made the mistake of

trying to eat for breakfast. It turns out Nikki Howard's digestive system and Danish? Not so

much.

I just hadn't had time to make myself a decent breakfast. I'd hardly believed it when the

alarm had gone off. It seemed like I'd only just closed my eyes, and it had been time to wake

up again. I'd wanted to die when I saw what time it was. One thing I knew for sure - no more
going out on a school night. Not for me.

And then, as I'd lain there, staring at Nikki Howard's plain white wall - a housekeeper or someone must have come to clean, because Gabriel's roses were gone. I guess they'd finally wilted and died - with Cosabela licking my face, eager for breakfast and a walk, it had occurred to me that I didn't have to go. Really. No one was making me. Nikki Howard was an emancipated minor. She didn't have to go to school if she didn't want to. I could roll over and go right back to sleep - lovely, delicious sleep. The limo wasn't coming to pick me up for the Ele shoot until three. I could stay in bed all day if I wanted to.

It was tempting. So tempting. Especially because I'd been too wired to go right to sleep when I'd gotten home last night and, after listening to Mom's messages - seven of them, each one more aggravated than the last - had finally gone to Lulu's room and checked her laptop while she slept and found that hers too had the same keystroke-tracking software on it that Nikki's had.

I'd disconnected the modems to both, and found the keyboards worked perfectly when I plugged them back into the modems again.
It was true I still had only a Stark-brand PC . . . but once it was functioning without spyware, who needed school? I'd have to set up a whole new online identity for Nikki, since I knew my parents had disconnected my old ones (too much temptation, they'd told me, especially since I was supposed to be dead). But it was going to be so good to be online again! I could play Journeyquest, and IM Christopher -

Oh no, wait. I couldn't. Because how would Nikki Howard know Christopher Maloney?

In order for her to get to know him, she was going to have to go to school today . . .

Which, I will admit, is the only thing that sent me stumbling out of bed, grabbing blindly for clothes, pulling on the first things my fingers came into contact with, which turned out to be some kind of high-waisted dress I was supposed to wear over black leggings with these cowboy boots and a lot of long necklaces (Lulu had laid them out for me last night, giggling about how I needed to look good on my first day of school).

The ensemble actually turned out to be surprisingly comfortable. I mean, for something that wasn't a T-shirt and jeans.

And after I'd brushed my teeth and washed my face and run a brush through my
(careful of my stil-tender surgery scar), I noticed in the mirror that . . . I actually looked kind

of good.

Who knew you could look good and actually FEEL good at the same time? I mean,

obviously you always feel good in sweats. But hardly anyone LOOKS good in

them (at least,

according to Frida). Not that I have ever let that stop me from wearing them to

school, except

on the occasions Frida spotted me and made me turn around and change into

something else.

But when she didn't, the Walking Dead would often stop and stare at me,
because I so

didn't match their uniform of pressed khakis and colared shirt . . . never a

drawstring at the

waist!

Maybe that had something to do with why, when I got out of the cab and started

heading

up the steps for the main office, every single person loitering in front of the

school stopped

what they were doing and simply . . . stared at me.

Then I heard the whispered words Nikki Howard and remembered that it wasn't

me, Em

Watts, they were staring at, or the fact that I was wearing a non-standard-issue
Walking Dead
uniform, but the fact that I was actually wearing a celebrity's body.

Oh, yeah. That's right.

A second later, I saw one of them detach itself from the nest and slink over. It took a

second for me to register that it was my sister, Frida. That's how much she'd been assimilated

to resemble all the others.

'Uh, Nikki?' she said, pretending like she didn't know it was actually me.

I stopped in my tracks and stared at her. That's because she was wearing a red and gold

TAHS cheerleading uniform.

And looked totally adorable in it.

'Did you change into that when you got here?' I blurted. It was the first thing that popped

into my head. Fortunately, we were far enough from Page 108 Meg Cabot: Airhead everyone

that there was no way anyone could overhear us. 'Because Mom would never have let you out

of the house in that. Does she even know you made the squad?'

'I changed when I got here,' Frida said impatiently. 'And no. And you're supposed to act

like you don't know me.'

'I don't know you,' I said, taking in the short pleated skirt. 'But . . . it looks . . . it looks . . .

.'
'Don't even say it, Em,' Frida said, her eyes narrowing.

'. . . cute.'

Frida's jaw sagged. 'Wait . . . did you just say what I think you said?

'I think Nikki is catching or something,' I said, shaking my head. 'I'm starting to like all kinds of things I used to hate.'

'Like Brandon Stark?' Frida wanted to know. 'Because there was a picture of you on TMZ this morning, being carried out of Cave last night by him. Also one that showed you with your legs spread apart as you fell into the limo, and you could see your-

My blood went cold. 'Mom didn't see it, did she?'

'Like she checks Perez Hilton first thing in the morning. She's too busy trying to call you.

Are you ever going to answer that cellphone she gave you? Al I can say is, good thing you were wearing panties. Oh my God,' Frida said to me under her breath. 'Don't look now, but, like, everyone is checking you out. They're all staring - I said, DON'T LOOK. But they're all looking. They're - hey. Where did you get those necklaces?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'They're Nikki’s. I think they're from her Stark clothing line. I can get you some, I think-'

That'd be awesome. Just look at them,' she said with relish, glancing back at
Whitney and
the other dead-eyed wannabes. 'They're trying to figure out what I'm doing, talking to you. I
said, DON'T LOOK.' Then she added, 'Oh my God, Whitney is looking over here.

WHITNEY ROBERTSON IS LOOKING OVER HERE - this is amazing.
Whitney

Robertson is actually looking at me. ME. She's never looked at me before, ever. This is the
best day of my life.'

'Yeah, well,' I said, brushing by Frida to head into the school, so I could get to the
Administration Office. 'Welcome to Nikki Howard's world, Frida. Good to know someone
appreciates it.'

As I slipped through the doors, I glanced over my shoulder and saw about thirty people
rush up to Frida, all clamouring to know what she and I had talked about. Frida played it cool,
shrugging and playing with her hair.
But it was clear she was in heaven.
Too bad that for her to get that way, I was going to have to go through hell.
They assigned me my old locker.
I should have known that they would of course. It's not like anyone else had dropped out
mid-semester. And even if someone had, I'm sure there's a waiting list to get into
TAHS,

which, in spite of its high population of Walking Dead (or perhaps because of?), is considered

a very good school.

I was pretty sure, in fact, that Stark Enterprises had paid a hefty 'endowment' in order to

get me to the top of that waiting list.

So it wasn't any wonder that I ended up with my old locker . . . and in many -

though not

al - of my old classes.

There was apparently some concern that Nikki Howard wouldn't be able to keep up in the

AP courses Em Watts had originally been enrolled in . . . Page 109 Meg Cabot: Airhead

especially in light of her alleged 'amnesia'. I had to do some fast-talking back in the Admin

Office, but did manage to get Nikki Howard enrolled in AP English, bio and trig (I assured

them that if I couldn't keep up with any of my classes, I'd drop out of them).

Of course, having missed a month's worth of school, there was a very good likelihood I

actually wouldn't be able to catch up . . . but I was willing to try, if it meant I

could be in some

classes, at least, with Christopher. How else was I going to strike up a friendship

otherwise?
It was weird pretending like I didn't know my combination so my student guide, this freshman I'd never met before, wouldn't think I had ESP or something.

The freshman, Moly Hung, was totally freaking out over the fact that she was showing Nikki Howard around her school. She was realy shy, and I saw her fingers shaking as she showed me how to spin the combination lock. After she'd let me try the combo myself a few times, to get used to it - and after I'd puled the locker open and seen, to my dismay, that al my stuff was gone (although of course I should have expected that) she finally worked up the courage to ask a question.

'Do you realy go out with Brandon Stark?' she wanted to know. 'B-because I saw a picture of you with him once . . .'

'Uh,' I said. 'Yeah. I mean, we're kind of keeping it casual. I had, um, an accident, and I-'

'Oh!' Moly flung a hand up over her mouth and looked horrified. 'Right! I forgot! You can't remember. I'm so sorry! Realy. God, I'm so stupid.'

'It's OK,' I told her. 'Don't worry about it.'

But she went around looking like she wanted to kil herself anyway.

She walked me to my first-period class - I'd been lucky enough (sarcasm) to get back into
Public Speaking - and, at the door, she said, 'Um . . . I know how hard it must be, starting at a
new school, where you don't know anyone. So if you want to sit with me at lunch, that - that
would be cool with me.'

'Uh,' I said. I hadn't even thought about the crucial lunch-seating situation. Who
would I be
sitting with anyway? I had just assumed I'd sit with Frida, but I realized now that
would be
absurd. Why would Nikki Howard sit with some girl with whom she'd had a casual
conversation on the steps in front of the school? The truth was, Nikki Howard would probably
go out to lunch anyway.

Oh, who was I kidding? Nikki Howard would never have been in a regular high school in
the first place. Except as some stunt for a reality show.

'Thanks,' I said to Moly. 'If I have lunch in the caff, I'll try to look for you.'

'Wel, have a good class,' Moly said, blushing with pleasure. 'And if you need me, here's
my cel. Cal me for anything. ANYTHING. OK?'

'OK,' I said, and smiled at her.

To my surprise, Moly blushed even harder. Then she hurried away, giggling, and looking
really . . . wel, pleased is the only way I can describe it.
Can I just say it's totally weird to smile at someone and have them seem so excited about it? After all, it was just a smile. No one EVER used to react like that when I smiled at them back in my old body. But in Nikki's body, when I smile, everyone practically seems to have a heart attack.

Except Brandon's dad.

And I knew things were only going to get weirder when I walked into Public Speaking - late, thanks to all the forms I'd had to fill out in the office, and the fact that I didn't know stuff like Nikki Howard's Social Security number. Every time someone asked me for it, I had to look it up (I'd remembered to charge her Sidekick), but that was OK though, because I was supposed to have lost my memory anyway.

I walked into Public Speaking, interrupting an oral presentation McKayla Donofrio was giving on the importance of reading to your children. She stopped dead when she saw me, and just stared. Soon the rest of the class woke up and did the same thing. It took a second or two for Mr Greer to notice no one was talking, and to open his own eyes and see me standing there.
'Oh,' he said, pretending he'd been awake the whole time. 'Yes. They told me to expect you. Nikki Howard, right?'

'Right,' I said, holding out my late pass and admission slip. 'Hi.'

'Great, great,' Mr Greer said, taking both slips and not even looking at them. 'Class, this is Nikki Howard. She's a new student who'll be joining us for the rest of the semester. Nikki,

grab an empty seat . . . I think there's one over there . . .'

He pointed to my old seat. Of course.

I went towards it, my head ducked, pretending I couldn't hear all the whispers as I slid into

my old seat. Christopher, I'd noticed when I'd risked a glance at him, was awake, for once.

And that wasn't the only thing about him that had changed:

He'd cut his hair.

I didn't mean to suddenly stagger to a standstil and stare at this guy who was supposed to

be a stranger to me, but it was pretty hard not to, since I hadn't - ever - seen Christopher with

hair above his neck. Gone was the long blonde curtain that had swept past his shoulders for as

long as I could remember - certainly since middle school, and all through high school. He now

wore his hair in a cut indistinguishable from Whitney Robertson's boyfriend, Jason Klein. In
fact, if I'd just glanced in Christopher's direction, I might even have mistaken him for Jason Klein, that's how close the resemblance was now. There was nothing at all to tell him apart from the rest of the Walking Dead. He was even wearing what appeared to be a pale green polo shirt with his jeans.

What had happened? I know it must have been upsetting and all, watching me die (sort of) right in front of him, and going to my memorial service and all that.

But upsetting enough to have turned him preppy?

'So, Nikki, just to get you up to speed,' Mr Greer said, startling me from my full-on open-mouthed astonishment, 'we're doing five-minute persuasive arguments on a topic of the student's choice. I won't expect you to have anything ready for this week, but if you feel up to it you can try next week.'

'OK,' I said quickly, tearing my gaze from Christopher and sliding into my seat. I automaticaly flipped open my brand-new notebook - anything to take my mind off what had happened to Christopher - and stared blindly straight ahead.

But it was really hard to concentrate on what McKayla was saying. I couldn't stop thinking about Christopher and his hair, even though, now that my back was to him, I couldn't see him
any more.

What had happened to him? Had the Walking Dead assimilated him, just like they had my little sister? How could this have happened in such a short time? I realize I'd been gone over a month, but stil! How could he have cut his hair like that? He'd resisted the Commander for so long-

And then I died, and bang . . . resistance was suddenly futile? No! No, that was just so wrong!

Not that his haircut looked bad. Quite the opposite, actualy. Even Frida would have to admit Christopher looked good. Realy good. This was an alarming development I wished she'd warned me about. Supposing Christopher, now that he had this new look, was actualy attracting female attention? I mean, besides mine.

No. It wasn't possible. The only female attention Christopher had ever attracted before was mine, and he hadn't even been aware of it (or at least, that I'd been female). But he looked realy, realy good now. I mean, I always thought he looked good. But now everyone had to have noticed how good he looked. What if he was going out with someone? Oh, why hadn't I thought to ask Frida what was going on with him,
romantically? A

lot can happen in a month - obviously. I mean, look at me. Talk about makeovers . . . I had a

whole new body. Not to mention a new face, name, Social Security number . . .

As if the fact that I suspected my best friend might be cheating on me with other girls (only

not realy, because he never knew I'd liked him that way in the first place, plus, he thought I

was dead) wasn't bad enough, I kept getting the feeling that everyone in class was looking at

me.

I was probably only being self-conscious.

But a quick glance up from the doodles I was making in my new notebook confirmed it: I

wasn't imagining things . . . everyone was staring at me. The minute I looked up, every head in

the room swiveled quickly away from me . . . except, when I pretended to drop my pencil and

swung down to pick it up and took a quick look in his direction, Christopher's head.

Christopher's gaze was fastened on to McKayla.

He hadn't even noticed me! What was up with that? Why was he even awake anyway?

He always slept through first period. Was Christopher going out with McKayla? No way.

McKayla was head of TAHS's business club. Business club. No way could he
like her. All she could talk about was how after she graduated from Harvard, she was going to revolutionize Wall Street. Christopher couldn't like her. He couldn't possibly . . .

I could see I was going to make a lot of progress thinking in that direction.

Frustrated, I began doodling harder. I drew a tiny poodle, this one of Cosabela. Lulu had promised last night to look after her while I was in school all day. The poor thing had whined and yelped when she'd seen me leaving the loft without her. I didn't know much about dogs,

but this didn't seem like the most stable behaviour. Had Nikki really taken her dog EVERYWHERE with her? Because Cosy certainly acted like it was a federal offence if she was left behind.

I was dreading the mess I'd find at home when I got back. I highly doubted Lulu was the most responsible dog-sitter. I was fairly certain there'd be some major carpet-scrubbing to do tonight.

Oh well. Nikki's fingers needed limbering up anyway. They were basically useless. I couldn't draw a thing with them . . . not even a measly poodle. What had Nikki Howard done with her hands all day anyway? You can only put on so many layers of nail
polish, right?

'Psst.'

I looked over my shoulder, hoping Page 112 Meg Cabot: Airhead Christopher was the one pssting me. Only he wasn't. Whitney Robertson smiled at me.

Yeah. Whitney. Smiled. At me.

The next thing I knew, a folded-up piece of paper sailed in my direction. I caught it.

When I unfolded it, I realized it was a note.

A note from Whitney.

I didn't know what to do. Whitney had never thrown me a note before. I saw her fellow Walking Dead member, Lindsey, twinkle her fingers at me. Like, helo! She was smiling, as

wel.

Instinctively, and before I could stop myself, I smiled back. Wait! What was I doing? Smiling at the Walking Dead?

Ducking my head so that Nikki's hair fell down to hide my face, I looked at the note.

Hi! it said, in curlicue writing with a flower dotting the i. Welcome to TAHS! We're so excited to have you here. I'm Whitney Robertson. I know you probably get this a lot, but

seriously - I'm your biggest fan. I know a lot of people say that, but in my case, it's really true.
I've been an admirer of your work since you first started back in print ads.

Anyway, I know it must be weird for you, starting a new school and al. So I just wanted to say Hey! And if you have Period B lunch, there's totally a place for you at our table! We're by the salad bar. XXX000 Whitney

Then she put her cellphone number.

I stared at that note for a long time. A lot of different responses went through my head as I read and then reread it. I thought about crumpling it up and throwing it back in her face.

Then I thought about writing a response, and saying that I'd heard al about Whitney and how mean she'd always been, and that I wouldn't sit with her and her friends at lunch if they were the last people on earth.

But I didn't end up doing either of those things. Because - and I know this sounds bizarre - but I really didn't think Nikki Howard would do either of those things.

Not that I was actually trying to BE Nikki Howard of course. At least, not at school.

But since I WAS her, I just . . . I don't know. I just couldn't see Nikki Howard - what I knew of her anyway - caring about what some twerpy girl like Whitney wrote to her in a note.

I guess that's because, when I looked deep down within myself, I just couldn't be
bothered
to care about Whitney any more, or her stupid one-upmanship. I had too many other
problems.
Like that my best friend couldn't even bring himself to make eye contact with me.
Stil, I knew if I didn't acknowledge her note at all she'd feel slighted. And I didn't need to
make a new enemy my first day. Even if she wasn't exactly a NEW enemy.
So I flipped my hair back, turned in my seat and smiled at her.
And something extraordinary Page 113 Meg Cabot: Airhead happened.
Whitney Robertson blushed.
 Seriously. I never thought I'd live to see the day. But her cheeks turned bright
pink with
pleasure, and she smiled back at me and waved, and Lindsey, behind her, waved too.
And Whitney mouthed, Cal me! And pantomimed making a phone cal.
I smiled again to acknowledge her, then turned back in my seat. This being Nikki thing
was easier - in some ways - than I'd thought it would be.
Whitney was al over me the minute class ended. Which wasn't cool, because I'd just been
about to turn to Christopher and make a little comment as a sort of icebreaker, like, Is this
class always this boring, or what?
Only I couldn't, because the Prom Queen From Hel was on me like ketchup on a steak.

'How ARE you?' she hurried over to ask me as soon as the bell rang. 'I saw on Entertainment Tonight about your . . . you know. It must be so awful, not being able to REMEMBER anything!'

'I can remember some stuff,' I said as I gathered my things. For instance, I could remember all the times Whitney and her friends had laughed at my underwear in the girls' locker room, because they were Hanes Her Way briefs and not Victoria's Secret thongs,

which is what they all wore.

'Oh, that's good,' Whitney said. 'Wcl, like I said, I'm Whitney and this is Lindsey-',

'Hi!' Lindsey cried. 'I'm, like, totally your biggest fan. I loved that spread you did in Vogue in July, with the gold accessories, and the tiger-'`

'- and we're just so excited to have you here at TAHS,' Whitney went on, speaking right over Lindsey as if she hadn't said anything. 'It is such an honour that out of all the schools in New York you chose ours-'`

'Are you guys going to move any time soon?' Christopher, who was standing behind us, inquired. 'Because some of us need to get to our next class.'

Whitney glanced at him over her shoulder, then rolled her eyes and moved out of
the way.

My heart swooped at that eye rol. Because it meant that, haircut or not, Christopher hadn't been accepted by the Walking Dead. He wasn't one of them! He may have looked like he was, but he wasn't. He was stil safe! He was stil him!

'Thanks,' Christopher said as he walked by.

'See you later,' I said to him.

He threw me a distracted look over his shoulder - as if he'd heard someone speak, but wasn't sure who - before disappearing into the throng in the halway.

Beside me, Whitney sneered and said, 'Sorry about that. Don't pay him any mind. One of our resident freaks. So you know, if you have any questions about TAHS or need anyone to show you around, I'd be more than happy to help. What are you doing for lunch, for instance?

You definitely don't want to go to the caff. The food there completely reeks-' 'Is that the new Marc Jacobs hobo tote?' Lindsey interrupted, pointing to the bag slung over my shoulder. 'Because I'm on the waiting list for one-' 'I don't know,' I said. 'I just found it in my Page 114 Meg Cabot: Airhead closet this morning.' Waiting list. Ha! 'Wel, I have to get to Spanish. So if you'll excuse me . . .'
'Me too!' Lindsey squealed. 'I think we must be in the same Spanish class! Room Six

Eleven? Oh my Dios! Here, let me show you where it is.'

'God, Lindsey, calm down,' Whitney said crabbily 'I'm sure Nikki can find her own way.'

'That's OK,' I said, turning to look Whitney square in the eye. 'Lindsey's being a great

help. Wel, bye, Whitney. It was nice to meet you.'

And I walked off arm-in-arm with Lindsey, conscious of being the recipient of a hundred

envious stares as we made our way down the hal - Whitney's the most envious of al.

But this time, it didn't bother me.

Because for once I was having too much fun to worry about it.
Airhead

Twenty-one

I found Frida where she always was just before lunch: the ground floor ladies' room the freshmen girls tended to haunt, carefully applying her lipgloss.

There were any number of other freshmen girls in there with her, but one look at me and they fled as if someone had pulled a fire alarm. I'm sure, given Nikki Howard's reputation, they thought I'd gone in there to do drugs. You'd have thought they'd have stuck around to watch,

maybe snap a camera pic of me wiping my nose to sel to the Enquirer for some extra cash.

But TAHS's freshmen class had never had a reputation for being that enterprising. Besides,

the truth was much tamer: I was in there to pump Frida for information.

'Why didn't you tel me Christopher cut his hair?' I demanded, lowering myself on to the sink beside the one she was leaning against.

'What?' She puckered at her reflection as she reapplied. 'Oh, yeah. Christopher cut his hair. News at eleven. Whatever. He did it for your memorial service. His dad made him.'

I stared at her reflection in shock. 'That's terrible!'
Frida simpered in the mirror. 'You think so? I thought it was sort of respectful. You know,

of your memory. His long hair was gross. And besides, Christopher didn't put up much of a

fight, from what I heard. He's been like a zombie since you croaked. He doesn't seem to care

about anything.'

I perked up at hearing this. 'Really? Did he cry? At my funeral, I mean?'

Frida shot me an annoyed look. 'God, you are so vain now.'

'I am not!' I hopped off the sink and glared at her. 'I am totally the least vain person you

know. How can you even say that? All I want to know is if Christopher seemed sad after I

died. That's not vanity. That's just curiosity. If you Page 115 Meg Cabot: Airhead had died,

you'd probably expect the city to shut down and name a day after you-'

'I would not,' Frida said with a sniff. And I suppose Christopher might have seemed sad.

But I don't even know why you care. I thought you two were just friends. And you can

do way better than Christopher now. And besides, you already have Brandon Stark - and

Gabriel Luna, probably, unless that Vespa ride was a fluke. How many boyfriends do you

need, anyway?'

I ignored her. 'Who does Christopher eat lunch with now?' I asked her. 'I mean,
now that

I'm dead?' Not McKayla Donofrio. Please don't say McKayla Donofrio . . .

'I don't know,' Frida said grumpily. 'I never see him in the caff any more. Someone said

he's been eating in the computer lab. You know he works there as a Teaching Assistant-

'Thanks,' I said, and started to hurry off to find Christopher - but not before I heard Frida

shout after me, 'You better come eat with me, Em - I mean, Nikki! I already told everybody

you were going to! Don't you dare stand me up!'

But I didn't have time to worry about my sister's reputation amongst the junior-varsity

cheerleading crowd. I only had forty minutes before lunch was over and I had to get to my

next class. I raced down the hal towards the computer lab (fortunately not running into Moly

Hung, who might have wondered how I knew my way around TAHS so deftly after her

extremely short tour) . . .

And there he was, exactly where Frida had said he might be, in the empty computer lab,

eating a sandwich in the glow of a solitary game of . . . Madden NFL?

But Christopher never played sports-related video games. Christopher hated sports. What

was going on here?
Stil, I really don't think I'd be exaggerating if I said that, though he was doing something extremely bizarre (based on his old patterns of behaviour anyway),

Christopher looked adorable with his short blond hair totally rumpled. He clearly hadn't bothered combing it, instead having let it air-dry after his shower on his way to school. The collar of his green polo shirt was slightly askew in the back, and bits of sandwich crumb had spilt down the front. He'd never been one for working out, so his biceps, disappearing into his short sleeves, weren't ridiculously huge-looking, like Jason Klein's. But they weren't nonexistent either.

'Um,' I said, since he was so involved in the game he didn't notice me standing in
the doorway. 'Excuse me?'

He glanced over and nearly choked on the mouthful of soda he'd swigged. Then he couldn't say anything at all, because he was too busy coughing.

'Sorry,' I said. Whoa. I probably should have rehearsed this a little better. What was Nikki doing in a computer lab anyway? What was my excuse for seeking Christopher out going to be? 'I just . . . I was wondering -'

'The Administration Office is down the hall,' Christopher said, having recovered himself.

Then, to my utter astonishment, he turned around in his chair and returned to his game.

Of Madden NFL.

Oh yes. Christopher Maloney had just blown me off. For a video game.

And not even a good video game. And he hadn't even blown off me either, but Nikki Howard. He'd just blown off the hottest teen supermodel on the planet.

What was wrong with him? I know he Page 116 Meg Cabot: Airhead liked Nikki Howard. I'd seen for myself how he'd stared at her that day at the grand opening at Stark's.

What was going on here?

And why hadn't I figured out before what I was going to say to him? Why did talking to
people have to be so hard? This would have so much easier if I could have just IMed him.

Wait . . . email . . .

'I know this isn't the Administration Office,' I said quickly. 'They said in the Administration Office that I could sign up for a student email account here.'

This wasn't even a lie. That was the most glorious part of al.

'Oh,' Christopher said. He looked away from his computer screen reluctantly. 'Sure. Yeah.

I can set you up with one, if you want.'

'You can?' I rushed over and sank down into the computer chair beside his. 'Wow, that would be so great. Thanks.'

I smiled at him.

And he completely ignored me.

It's true I'd only been Nikki Howard for a couple of days in the outside world. But I had already learned in that short time what Nikki's smile did to people. Especially guys. It rendered them completely helpless. Guys turned to total Jel-O when Nikki smiled. They would do anything - anything - Nikki wanted when she smiled. There was only one guy who had seemed immune to Nikki's smile, and that had been Brandon Stark's father.

And now the only guy in the world who I actualy cared about impressing -
Christopher Maloney - was immune too. He wouldn't even look me in the face. He kept his gaze firmly on the computer screen in front of me as he drew up the school's email database.

How was I going to get through to Christopher - as a person, not as Nikki Howard - if I couldn't even get him to look me in the eye and see that there was someone in here, behind the mascara?

'So,' I began, feeling desperate. 'You like . . . computer games?'

Oh my God, could I sound more lame? If I'd been in the computer lab (I mean, as Em Watts) listening to this conversation between Nikki Howard and Christopher, I'd be laughing my butt off round about now.

'Some of them,' Christopher said, tapping away at his keyboard.

'Me too,' I said. 'Have you ever played Journeyquest?'

That got his attention. Finally. He turned his stunned gaze towards me.

'You play Journeyquest?' he asked incredulously.

'Sure,' I said, my heart giving a happy double thump, despite the fact that I probably should have been insulted. I mean, what was so weird about Nikki Howard liking Journeyquest? What, she was too stupid to play a tactic-based RPG?

Oh, who even cared? He'd looked at me! He'd looked me in the eye! It wouldn't
be long

now until we were friends again! He'd ask me over and soon we'd be eating Doritos and

watching surgery shows and getting yeled at by the Commander, just like old times.

Everything would be normal again. Everything would be just like it used to be. I was so happy!

Happier than I could remember being since I'd looked into that rear-view mirror and seen

Nikki Howard's face looking back at me.

'Level forty-five is only as high as I've gotten though,' I said.

Level forty-five, Christopher! It's me, Christopher! Em! Look at me, Christopher! Look into my eyes! Do you see me? Hi, it's me, Em! I'm looking right at you!

Christopher studied me a moment longer, and I could have sworn he saw me. I really thought he had.

But then he completely crushed me by looking away.

'I don't play that game any more,' was all he said, and he went back to typing.

Wait. What? What just happened? What did he mean, he didn't play Journeyquest any more? No one just stops playing Journeyquest. It's not just a game. It's a lifestyle.

And what about me? Me, Em? Had he seen me or not? He hadn't. He couldn't possibly,
right?

Or he wouldn't have looked away.

'Yeah,' he said. 'So your new email address is going to be Nikki dot Howard at TAHS dot EDU. It should be effective right away.'

What was going on? Why was he just ignoring me like this? Guys don't just ignore Nikki Howard. Em Watts, yes.

But even gay guys ask Nikki what kind of moisturizer she uses (not that I know the answer).

'OK,' I said, not knowing what else to say. 'Thanks.'

OK. Christopher didn't want to talk to me. I mean, Nikki Howard. I could take a hint.

No. No, actually, I really couldn't.

'You know how to set up your student email account at home?' Christopher asked me.

'Right?'

I knew how to set up my own email account. I'd been setting up my own email accounts since I'd gotten my first one in the fifth grade.

My mom, the women's studies professor, had always urged Frida and me never to act dumb just to try to win over a guy.
But this was one case, I felt, where she'd have understood.

Because suddenly I realized I had an excuse to talk to Christopher again tomorrow. And I

realy, realy needed one. Because it didn't look as if he was going to be asking me over for

Doritos and surgery shows any time soon.

'I realy don't know how to do that setting-up thingy,' I said. I was practicaly batting my

eyelashes, I was hamming up the defenceless-female thing so much. My mom would have had

a coronary.

Christopher stared at me. 'You don't,' he said. He didn't sound too surprised.

'No,' I said. 'Is it hard? Do you know how to do it?'

'Yes,' he said. 'It's not hard. Do you have something in your eye?'

I quit batting my eyelashes.

'No,' I said, dropping the defenceless-female thing. Dang, why did flirting have to be so

difficult? Why couldn't he just grab and kiss me Page 118 Meg Cabot: Airhead like Brandon

and Justin had? I was good at kissing! Or at least, Nikki was. 'If I just bring in my laptop

tomorrow, wil you set me up?'

'Sure,' he said. I couldn't believe he hadn't falen for the eyelash thing. Which, by the way, I

was pretty sure would have made Justin Bay fal over. In a coma. 'That'll be fine.'
'Great.' I smiled at him. I put it at ful wattage, the kind of smile that had caused Raoul, the art director, to say yesterday, Nikki, could you tone it down a little? We aren't seling used cars here.

But I didn't want to tone it down any more. I wanted to do whatever I had to in order to get a reaction from Christopher.

Not that it appeared to be working, since he continued just to stare at me blankly.

'I'm Nikki, by the way,' I said, stil smiling. 'I mean, I know you know that. But . . .

I stuck out my right hand.

Christopher didn't smile in return.

'I'm Christopher,' he said, taking my hand and shaking it. 'Maloney.'

His grip was firm, but strangely lifeless. I don't know how to describe it, except that . . .

It was like shaking hands with a dead person. I mean, someone who realy was dead, only stil walking around.

Which made no sense, since I was that person.

His fingers were warm, like mine. I knew he wasn't dead. Not realy. It was like something inside him had just . . . given up. Like with his battle over his hair with his dad. He'd just . . .

surrendered, after al these years. He honestly didn't care any more.
What was going on with him? What was wrong with him?

And how was I going to get close enough to him to find out, when I could barely get him
to look at me to see that I was here, inside Nikki Howard?

I didn't want to let go of his hand . . . and I didn't think it was because of Nikki's wantonness either. I mean, a hand is different than lips or a tongue. It just felt so good to be
close to him again, to be in his presence, even if he didn't know it was me.

But I knew I had to let go, because you can't sit around in a computer lab holding hands
with some guy you just met. Even if you were best friends with him in a past life, and you are a

teenaged supermodel now.

So I dropped his hand . . . just a second after he tugged on it to release it from mine.

Clearly he thought I was a crazy person. I half expected him to wipe his hand on his jeans. But

he restrained himself.

'So,' I said, ducking to gather up my Marc Jacobs tote in an effort to hide my mortification.

'I'm headed down to the cafeteria for lunch. Do you want to join me?'

I knew what he was going to say before he said it.

'Uh, no, thanks,' Christopher said, giving me a strange look. 'But enjoy yourself. Stay

away from the tuna salad.'
It was the first remotely humorous thing he'd said. I realized how much I'd missed his
sarcastic remarks. Almost as much as I'd missed him.

'Thanks,' I said, with another smile.

But once again it seemed to have no effect on him. He returned to his computer screen,
going back to Madden NFL without Page 119 Meg Cabot: Airhead another word.

And I slunk from the lab, embarrassed, hurt . . . and more than a little confused.

'Oh my God, there you are,' Frida cried, rushing up to me in the halway. 'I've been waiting
for, like, ever. Where were you?'

'I went to see Christopher in the computer lab,' I said. 'I told you-

'God,' Frida muttered. 'Why are you hanging out with that geek when you could be

with Gabriel Luna?'

'Gabriel Luna thinks I'm a drug addict,' I pointed out, remembering last night's
embarrassing social gaffe. Which are al I seem to have, apparently, where cute guys are

concerned.

'Wel, whatever,' Frida said, grabbing my arm. 'Come on. I told everyone on the JV squad

you were sitting with us at lunch today.'

'And just how, exactly,' I asked as she propelled me along, 'are you and I supposed to
have met, Frida, and become so chummy that I'm sitting with you at lunch now?'

'We met outside the school on the steps this morning,' Frida said. 'Remember? Everybody
saw us together.'

'Great,' I said, rolling my eyes. 'Frida, what's wrong with Christopher?'

'He's a freak,' Frida said as she dragged me towards the cafeteria. 'He always
was. You're just noticing it now because you're finally normal.'

'No, I mean . . . what happened to him? He's . . . different. He doesn't even
like Journeyquest any more. He plays Madden NFL. Christopher hates sports. And he . . . I
can't really explain it. But it's like he - I went in there to get an email address for
Nikki, and he'd barely look at me.'

'Oh, and I suppose you thought he'd be all over you,' Frida said with a snort, 'just because
you're Nikki Howard now.'

'Well,' I said. I didn't want to sound snotty. But . . . 'Yeah. I mean . . . he's a guy, right?
And guys are usually all over Nikki. Unless they're gay. So what's wrong with him?'

'What do you want me to say, Em? I mean, Nikki. I told you, he's been weird ever since
you croaked. I mean, weirder than usual. I guess he was just always in love with you, but
didn't realize it until you were gone, and now that you're dead, he's wasting away. Is that what
you want to hear?' She flung a glance at me over her shoulder, saw my expression and let out
a bark of laughter. 'God! It is! Get over yourself. You can have any guy you want now. Why
do you have to like the one guy who liked you better when you were just average, like the rest
of us?'

We'd reached the cafeteria doors. Frida turned to confront me with her hands on her hips.

I stared down at her with tear-filed eyes.

'Oh my God, Frida,' I said with a little sob. 'Do . . . do you realy think that's it?'

Frida stared up at me. 'Oh my God. You realy like him, don't you? Listen . . . How am I

supposed to know? I'm just saying. It might make sense. But I could be totaly wrong. Look,

Christopher is the least of your problems right now. You are about to enter the
Tribeca

Alternative High School cafeteria. Only it's a whole new bal game than it was a month ago.

You're hot now. Do you understand? You have got to get Christopher out of your head and

put on your game face. You're Nikki Howard, supermodel. Not Em Watts, weirdo. Got it?'

I nodded. But I wasn't realy listening. I Page 120 Meg Cabot: Airhead kept
thinking
about what she'd said. Was it really possible? Could Christopher have realized, after I'd died,
that he loved me? Was that why he didn't want to play Journeyquest any more? Because it
reminded him of me? Was that why he'd finally consented to cut his hair? Because nothing
mattered to him any more, now that I was gone?
Oh God! That was the most romantic thing I'd ever heard!
But what was I going to do about it? How was I going to get Christopher interested in
Nikki Howard if he was busy pining away for a dead girl? Who, by the way, happened to be
me.
And, no offence, but you would have thought he'd have been a little nicer to me back
when I'd been alive, if he'd been so madly in love with me.
But he'd never even so much as tried to kiss me.
Wait . . . maybe that's what he was feeling so bad about!
Oh! That was even more romantic!
But before I had a chance to really digest that, Frida was yanking me on the arm and we
were in the caff . . .
. . . where the volume of the conversation, already at an ear-splitting din, increased tenfold
at the mere sight of me in the doorway.

'There she is!' The murmur rippled through the entire cafeteria.

And not just the Walking Dead were saying it. The geeks, the goths, the skaters, the druggies . . . al of them were saying it. 'There she is'

I felt myself turning red . . .

'I don't know about this, Free,' I said as Frida herded me towards the hot-food line and

thrust a tray into my hands.

'Trust me,' Frida said. 'Even supermodels have to eat, don't they?'

Maybe so. But it might have been easier simply to get something out of the vending machines down the hal, acid reflux or not. I was excruciatingly aware of being the centre of

everyone's attention as I made my way down the food line. My selections were buzzed about

as if I'd been Tiger Woods, lining up a game-winning putt.

'She's going for the tofu patty,' I heard them whispering. Then, seconds later, 'An apple!

She took an apple!'

I wanted to throw down my tray and run from the room - run out of the school and al the way back to the hospital and up to the fourth floor into Dr Holcombe's office. 'I need a new body! I can't be in this one a second longer! I can't be Nikki Howard! I just want
to be

someone normal!'

Instead, I stepped up to the cashier to pay for my food. Then I followed Frida to her table

... .

Where the entire junior-varsity cheerleading team was sitting. They all stopped talking as

Frida and I approached. I fully expected them to say, 'What are you doing, trying to sit at our

table, loser? The geek table is over THERE.'

But I'd forgotten. I'm not Em Watts, geek, any more. I'm Nikki Howard.

And Nikki Howard is apparently welcome everywhere (except the computer lab).

'Oooh!' a dark-haired girl cried, scooting her tray over.

'I'm so glad you came over here. Sit by me! Sit by me, I'm your hugest fan!'

Frida took the place the girl was offering though, after giving her a severe look. 'Now,

Mackenzie,' she said sternly. 'Remember what I said.'

'Sorry!' Mackenzie turned beet red. 'Right, no gushing. Sorry. Sorry.'

The other girls, all smiling up at me, scooted over to make room. I felt a little uneasy. I
couldn't quite believe I was being WELCOMED at a table belonging to the Walking Dead.

But it soon became apparent our table was THE table to be at. Especially when,
sooner had Frida made introductions (none of which I retained, since all her friends appeared to be called either Taylor, Tyler or Tory), a familiar voice cried, 'There you are!' And I turned my head to see Whitney Robertson standing there with a tray of salad and diet soda, Lindsey and several other key Walking Dead members from the junior class - including one from the senior class, Jason Klein - right behind her. 'Oh my God,' Whitney said. 'I've been looking all over for you.' And the next thing I knew, she was shoving red and gold uniforms aside to make way for herself, her boyfriend and her best friend. 'Thanks muchly,' she said to Frida's friends, who hadn't so much as moved as been pushed out of the way. 'So, Nikki, how are you enjoying your first day here at TAHS?' 'She's liking it a lot, Whitney' Frida, who'd apparently appointed herself my spokesperson, looked enormously pleased. I guess it's not every day a freshman gets graced with the presence of the most popular girl in school at her lunch table. 'Aren't you, Nikki?' I took a swig of my milk (yeah. Nikki likes milk. Two per cent. She's got acid reflux, not lactose intolerance).
'Yeah,' I said after I'd swallowed.

'I was teling Nikki today in Public Speaking,' Whitney said - then added, as an aside to everyone else at the table, 'Nikki and I have Public Speaking together.'

'Me too!' Lindsey cried. 'I'm in Nikki's Public Speaking class too! Also her Spanish class. And I'm on the waiting list for that Marc Jacobs tote . . .' 

'- how we feel so fortunate that she decided to attend our school, out of al the schools in the city' Whitney went on, as if Lindsey hadn't interrupted. 'Wasn't I, Nikki?'

'Yeah,' I said after swalowing a bite of the salad I'd gotten to accompany my tofu patty . . .

. which tasted fantastic, and not at al like the cardboard box I'd been expecting it to taste like.

'I just wish we'd had more advance notice of her enrolment,' Whitney went on, to everyone at the table. 'Because then we could have organized a proper welcome for her.'

Al the girls nodded in agreement. Jason, I noticed, was staring at my boobs. I'm not even kidding.

'Wow,' I said. 'Thanks. That'sreally great. But I feel plenty welcome enough.'

'Wel,' Whitney said 'I'm going to be sure to get you a list of extra-curriculars, in case you decide you might want to join in on some of the fantastic clubs and organizations our school
has to offer. I, for instance, am president of the junior class, as well as captain of the Spirit Club.'

'Realy,' I said. 'The Spirit Club. What's that?'

Not that I didn't know. I just wanted to see if she'd describe it the way Christopher and I

used to: as the Society for the Lame.

'Oh, well, the Spirit Club makes an effort to foster school spirit amongst the student population by promoting events in and around Tribeca Alternative such as pep rallies, health fairs, aluminium can drives, casino nights, weekend carnivals-

'Casino nights,' Lindsey chimed in.

'I said that already,' Whitney said, giving Lindsey a dirty look. 'Realy what it's all about is -

' Whitney lowered her voice as if she was afraid of being overheard - 'some people who go to this school don't appreciate all the fantastic programmes and opportunities it has to offer. So

the Spirit Club does its best to get students excited about these events, such as games, community-service programmes ... things that will look great on their college applications.'

I blinked at her. 'Why are you whispering?'

She glanced around, then seemed to realize that the school's two worst malcontents - Em
Watts and Christopher Maloney - weren't within hearing distance. 'Oh, I don't
know. It's just

that some people think having school spirit is sily. But I don't think there's
anything sily about

wanting to take as much advantage as possible of what, for me at least, have
truly been some

of the best years of my life!

Whoa. If high school was supposed to be the best years of my life - at least so far - I was

truly destined to have a sucky adulthood.

'Wow,' I said again. 'That sounds . . . great.'

'Enough about this school crap,' Jason Klein said, leaning forward so that his
massive -

and, to me, revolting - biceps sweled beneath the sleeves of his pink polo. 'What clubs can

you get us into?'

'Jason!' Whitney lady-slapped him on the shoulder while she giggled. 'Stop! Don't pay any

attention to him. He's so bad.'

Jason ignored her. 'I saw you got into Cave last night,' Jason said. 'Can you get us into

Cave?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'Maybe.'

'Maybe what?' Jason demanded. 'Can you get us in or not?'

'If it's Jerks Who Interrupt Their Girlfriends Night,' I said. 'Then I can probably
get you in.'

Whitney gasped. Lindsey let out a giant horse laugh.

But what impressed me most was that quite a few of the JV cheerleaders turned around

and high-fived one another, impressed by the fact that I'd dissed Jason Klein. If this, I realized,

was the kind of company Frida was keeping, then I had been quite badly underestimating the

TAHS JV cheerleading squad - and possibly cheerleaders everywhere. They were a fun

bunch.

Frida, however, just glared at me. I mouthed What? and shrugged. I realy don't see what

else she'd expected me to say.

But Jason took it good-naturedly.

'OK, OK,' he said, smiling sheepishly. 'You got me. I'l shut up.'

Which was just another sign of how Page 123 Meg Cabot: Airhead different life is when

you've got a supermodel's face as opposed to just a normal one. If I had said something like

that to Jason back when I'd been in my Em Watts body, I'd never have heard the end of it . . .

especialy from Whitney.

But since I was Nikki, and not Em, al was forgiven. In fact, as we were putting our trays
away, just before the bell rang, Whitney sidled up to me and, to show there were no hard feelings, said in a low voice, I guess so the others wouldn't overhear, 'Listen, Nikki, if you're not doing anything after school, maybe you could come up to my place and I could help you out with some of your homework. I know it must seem like you're never going to catch up at this rate - plus I know it's been a while since you were last in school. So I just thought-

'Gosh,' I said. 'Thanks. But I have a shoot.'

Even if I hadn't, no way would I waste any of my precious time going to Whitney Robertson's penthouse so she could show me the wrong way to compute the area of a triangle. Or try on different-coloured sparkle eyeshadow, or whatever it is the Walking Dead do in their spare time.

'Some other time though,' I added with a smile when I saw her face fal.

As soon as she saw the smile, Whitney smiled back.

'Great!' she gushed. 'Wel, toodle-oo!'

Seriously. That's what she said to me. Toodle-oo.

I kind of wished Cosy had been with me, because I could have looked down at her and gone, 'Wel, Toto. I guess we're not in Kansas any more.'
Except that I've never actually been to Kansas.

Although I'm fairly sure Nikki has. Nikki's been everywhere.

Except where I most want to be.
Airhead

Twenty-two

The Ele shoot was a snap compared to the Vanity Fair shoot the day before. For one thing, I at least had a little bit of an idea what I was supposed to be doing now. Plus, I didn't have to smush my boobs against anyone this time, or wrap myself around anyone else's physical person (such as Brandon Stark). This time, it was just me.

Don't get me wrong. I stil had to smile just the right way, but it was more important that the gowns I was wearing flowed right. I swear, every two minutes I heard, 'Wait - hold on -'

and someone was running over to adjust a fold or smooth a wrinkle. It was a little maddening.

And even though I don't particularly care about fashion, I sort of get it now. I mean, about why other people care about it, and why it's interesting and sort of important to some people.

The truth is, fashion can be sort of . . . wel, Page 124 Meg Cabot: Airhead fun.

I know! I never 'got' fashion before. Clothes were just things you threw on to keep from being naked or cold.

But the dresses - I mean, gowns - that were at this shoot were so gorgeous, I actualy
caught my breath when I saw them on me. I can't even imagine where you'd WEAR a bright red long dress trimmed with dyed black ostrich feathers with a neckline that plunges to your sternum. I mean, except maybe to the Oscars.

But I couldn't help but be curious about who'd designed them - which surprised the people at the shoot, because they said I should have known without asking, just by the feel and look of them.

But then Kely reminded them quickly of my head injury (which the hairstylist, Vivian, had already found). And then they all wanted to talk about that (my interview was going to run in the same issue, but I wasn't meeting the journalist who was doing it until Saturday).

Anyway, they all took great pleasure in telling me about the designers who had gowns at the shoot, and other favourite designers of Nikki's as well. And I have to admit, their stories were kind of interesting. Like, even my MOM would have gotten a kick out of the story of Miuccia Prada, a feminist mime who took over her grandfather's leather goods company in 1978, making 'Miu Miu' one of the thirty most powerful women in Europe (according to
the Wal Street Journal), with an estimated fortune of 1.4 bilion dolars.

And Coco Chanel, who popularized the little black dress for women and founded a

fashion empire, becoming the only fashion designer ever to make Time magazine's 100 Most

Influential People of the Twentieth Century.

All this - plus the lecture the make-up guy gave me about the dark circles under my eyes,

thanks to my lack of sleep, and the fact that my mom would notstop caling (but I couldn't

exactly pick up in the middle of a fashion shoot), my employer is maybe (OK, probably)

spying on me, and the tugging and wrenching and holding my breath required to get me into the

corsets I needed to squeeze into some of the gowns - was enough to keep my mind off what

had happened in school earlier that day with Christopher. The fact that I nearly passed out

several times, the corsets were so tight, and that I could barely move helped too.

The truth was, I don't know how Nikki did it. I was supposed to stare off into the distance

as if I was gazing at a far-off star (when really what I was looking at was a piece of paint

peeling off the rafters on the ceiling) while NOT thinking about how I couldn't breathe and my

feet hurt and how tired I was . . .
and, oh yeah, how everyone saw me being carried out of Cave last night like I was the drunk one, not my so-called boyfriend, and that the guy I'd actually like to be dating by the way doesn't know I'm alive?

No, I mean, literally doesn't know I'm alive. He thinks I'm dead, and I can't tell him I'm not. And he isn't too impressed with the new body I'm in. In fact, he might just be the only guy on the planet who's not.

How can anyone concentrate on looking beautiful when all that is going on around them, and inside their head as well? Modeling isn't easy. Modeling is actually really hard. Modeling is ACTING. You have to ACT like you're actually enjoying yourself, when the truth is, every single inch of you is hurting and uncomfortable . . . most of all your heart.

I mean, if you're me.

I was almost sagging with exhaustion when the art director, Veronica, said, 'I think that's all we need, Nikki. You can go now.'

I swear I nearly ripped that last couture gown off, I wanted to get out of there so badly.

'. . . you've got the Vogue shoot tomorrow at three. . .' Kely was telling me as I ran down the steps to the limo.
'I know,' I yelled over my shoulder.

'And don't go out tonight,' she shouted at me as I collapsed into the back seat. 'You need
to get some sleep! You looked awful today.'

'I won't!' I slammed the limo door behind me. Finally! We didn't have much time.

'We're making a stop before we go to the loft,' I said to the driver. 'The computer store on
Prince and Greene.'

The driver looked at me sceptically in the rear-view mirror. 'It's almost eight o'clock, Miss
Howard.'

'I know,' I said. 'The store is open late on Thursdays.'

I sank back against the leather seat and watched as we glided along Park Avenue, making
our way downtown. I'd realized as I'd been standing there 'gazing at a far-off star' that I
couldn't take Nikki Howard's Stark-brand hot-pink laptop to school tomorrow for
Christopher to set up my email account on. For one thing, it was just too embarrassing. I
mean, seriously - hot pink?

And for another, how could I be sure it didn't have some other kind of tracking software
built into it with which Stark Enterprises was watching my every move online? No. I needed a
whole new, non-Stark computer. Just like I needed a new, non-Stark cellphone on which to
talk to my parents.
I'd pick up both on the way home. Thank God the Apple store was open until
nine on
Thursday nights.
And I had Nikki Howard's platinum American Express card.
There were perks to being rich and famous after al.
Especialy when you're rich, famous and have your face plastered al over a Stark
Megastore a few blocks away from the computer store, and everyone in there
recognizes you
the minute you walk in. Even late as it was, there was a queue. But when you're
Nikki
Howard, I'm sorry to say, you get treated differently from everyone else. A
salesperson came
right over to me, almost before I'd gotten ten feet into the store, and I heard the
usual buzzing
that started everywhere I seemed to go. He asked if he could help me, and I told
him what I
wished.
And he told me to wait right there while he went and got it.
As much as being Nikki seriously sucked sometimes, it could seriously rock at
other times.
I had my new laptop and phone and was out the door ten minutes and fourteen
autographs
later.

It was as I was waiting for the limo driver to swing around and pick me up (he'd been
forced to circle while I shopped due to the number of mounted cops in the area) that I heard a
voice behind me say, 'Nikki?' and I turned around expecting to see another autograph hunter.

... and was shocked to see Gabriel Luna instead.

'You!' I cried.

He looked as surprised to see me as I was to see him.

'Are you stalking me?' he asked in that adorable British accent. But he was smiling, so I
knew he was joking.

'I think you're Page 126 Meg Cabot: Airhead stalking me,' I said. 'What are you doing
here?'

'I live just up the street,' he said. 'I'd ask what you were doing here, but it's obvious.'

Always the gentleman, he took hold of the enormous boxes I was carrying.

'Here, alow me.

Are you trying to find a taxi again? You'll never get one at this corner, you know.'

'No, I have a ride,' I said. 'He's just circling. But thank you.'

'Oh,' Gabriel said. 'So you've recovered from last night?'
Remembering in a rush the last time I'd seen him, I said, sticking out my chin, 'That was . .

I wasn't even . . . Gabriel, I don't even drink. Seriously, you can ask any of the bartenders.

Next time you go to Cave, have them pour you a Nikki.'

He blinked at me. 'A what?'

A Nikki. It's just water. 'And I was only trying to get Brandon out of there. I mean, Brandon's just - we're friends.'

'Oh.' Gabriel stared down at me. He looked confused. 'I see.'

'I'm not who you think I am, Gabriel,' I said. I could see the headlights of the limo sliding towards us. It was stuck behind a traffic light, but coming inexorably towards us. Stil, there was something I needed to get off my chest. 'My idea of a fun night is playing computer games.

I didn't even want to go out last night. I just did it because Lulu threw a surprise welcome-home party for me and I didn't want to hurt her feelings because she's been realy sweet to me.

I'm going to go home tonight and do homework. That's my wild, crazy life. Realy.'

'Look,' Gabriel said, his expression unreadable. 'Don't be angry. I know I come off as a bit of a prat sometimes. It's just . . . wel, it's like those girls we ran into the other day. The
ones who were chasing us. They look up to you. I worry you don't realize that.'

'Wel, I do,' I said. Was that traffic light ever going to turn green? Then I shot him a

suspicious look. 'Wait a minute. What were you doing at that club at two in the morning

anyway?'

'Oh,' Gabriel said, looking embarrassed suddenly. 'I was giving the DJ a copy of a new

song I wrote the other day. To see if he thought it would work as a dance mix.'

'Oh,' I said, smiling. 'And? Did he like it?'

It was hard to tell in the glow from the windows of the computer store. But I think Gabriel

was actually blushing a little. 'He loved it actually. He played it on the spot. It brought the place

down. Everyone adored it.'

The limo finally pulled up in front of me and the driver sprang out from behind the wheel.

'I'm so sorry, Miss Howard,' he said. 'I got caught behind one of those tour buses . . . '

'That's OK,' I said. 'Could you take this?' I took the huge boxes from Gabriel and handed

them to the driver, who hurried to put them in the boot. Then I turned back to Gabriel and

said, 'Wel, here's my car.'

'I can see that,' Gabriel said, taking in the long black limousine with raised eyebrows. It
had attracted the attention of quite a few people on the sidewalk as well, many of whom had
stopped to stare at it, and me too.

'I owe you a ride,' I reminded Gabriel. 'So if there's anywhere you need to go . . .',

'Not tonight,' Gabriel said with a funny little half-smile. 'But I'm going to hold you to that.'

He could not have shocked me more when he leaned over and kissed me - on the lips, but
lightly, barely brushing my mouth with his - and whispered, standing just inches from me, 'Don't
you want to know the name of my new song?'

'The name of your new song?' I stared up at him, my mouth still tingling from the fleeting
kiss. Even though he wasn't touching me, it was as if I was bolted into place.

'Right,' he said. 'It's called “Nikki”.'

And then he was gone, disappearing into the hordes of people who'd gathered on the
sidewalk to stare at me and my limo.
Airhead

Twenty-three

Dragging myself and my boxes from the limo when it finally pulled up in front of my building, I took the elevator up to the loft, expecting to find it empty, since it was after nine at night. I thought surely Lulu would be out on the town, doing whatever it was Lulu did when she was left unsupervised.

So you can imagine my surprise when I stepped from the elevator and heard her call my name.

'Nikki!' cried a voice from a ghostly figure stretched out across a massage table in the middle of the loft's living room. Lulu was - mostly - under a white sheet, while a stern looking woman in a white uniform kneaded her shoulders.

'Uh,' I said, even more confused than usual. 'Hi?'

'Hi,' Lulu said, popping her head up from the hole in the centre of the massage table. 'Oh yeah. I forgot. Nikki, this is our housekeeper, Katerina. Katerina, this isn't Nikki. I know it looks like her, but it's not. She had a spirit transfer, and now she's someone else. But you can
Katerina stopped kneading Lulu's shoulders and stared at me. 'You say this is not Miss Nikki?' she demanded in a heavy Eastern European accent.

'No,' Lulu said. 'Well, I mean, it is. But it isn't.'

'Yes it is, Lulu,' I said, frustrated. 'It's still me. I just don't remember anyone. Because I have amnesia, remember? Hi, Katerina.'

Katerina stared at me for a little bit longer. Then she shrugged and went back to massaging Lulu. 'You girls,' she said. Only it came out sounding like 'gels'. 'I give up with you and your silly games a long time ago.'

'I know it was your turn to get massaged by Katerina, Nik,' Lulu went on, plopping her face back down into the hole in the centre of the massage table. 'But I just got back from a meeting with my record label, and it was such hell. They say I have to sing these two reject songs from Lindsay Lohan's album -as if - and I was still such a wreck from last night, I must have had fifteen mojitos and a pack of Milk Duds, and I knew only Katerina could whip me back into shape. And, oh my God, Nik, Brandon has been calling, like, all day. He says your cel's not on, and all his messages have been going to voicemail. What's up with
that? Like,

turn your cel on. Also, he is, like, totaly sorry about last night. He's been talking about getting

his dad's jet for this weekend and taking us to Antigua, and you know he only does that when

he's suffering a major guilt trip. Just FYI. Oh, and I had to lock Cosy up, she was jumping al

over me, I couldn't take it, she's in my room, she's been such a nightmare -'

I put down the boxes and crossed the loft to Lulu's bedroom door, which I swung open.

Cosabela careened out of it like a shot, leaping against my shins and yapping happily, her

tongue loling. I scooped her up and went to sit down on the couch with her cradled in my

arms while she lapped at my face.

'She's already had her walk.' Lulu popped her head up to look at me again. 'Karl took her.

And I fed her. Oh my God, what is on your face?'

I blinked at her above Cosy's fluffy head. 'Where?'

Next thing I knew, Lulu had swung down off the massage table and, stil clutching the sheet

around her, marched up to me, reached across and scraped a fingernail across my cheek.

'Ow!' I cried, leaning away from this five-foot lunatic.

Lulu looked down at her fingernail and said, 'I knew it. It's a dead skin flake. Your skin is
dry. What have you been using on it?'

'Look,' I said, stil clutching my cheek. 'I appreciate your help, looking after Cosy while I

was in school and at the shoot and al. But you can't just go around SCRATCHING people-'


show me the dead skin flake.

'God,' I said. 'Soap. What else?'

Lulu looked horrified. 'Soap? SOAP? You've been washing your skin with SOAP?'

'Wel, what else would you use on your skin?' I asked.

Lulu shook her head, stil staring at me. Then she said to the housekeeper, 'Katerina. My

robe. We have a crisis that needs to be dealt with. STAT.'

Katerina nodded gravely and lifted Lulu's robe. Lulu, stil holding the sheet in strategic

locations, slipped her arms into the robe's sleeves . . . then let the sheet drop to the floor, once

she was safely covered.

'Look,' I said, 'I don't know what's going on here, but I do not need any kind of beauty

intervention, if that's what this is about. I have a lot on my mind right now, and I just want to-'

'I beg your pardon,' Lulu said, 'but Nikki Howard gave you her body - she donated it - as
a GIFT, with the expectation that you would take care of it.'
'I HAVE been taking care of it,' I insisted. 'I've been eating nothing but freaking green tea
and tofu since I GOT this body, as that's the only stuff that doesn't appear to make my
stomach churn-

'But what are you washing your hair with?' Lulu demanded. 'And how long are you letting
it deep condition? And what kind of exfoliant are you using? Don't answer that, I already
know: none. It's true that Nikki Howard was a natural beauty. But she didn't just
Page 129
Meg Cabot: Airhead GET that way. She CULTIVATED it. With a careful and diligent beauty
regimen. WHICH YOU ARE NOT FOLLOWING.'
'Look,' I said, glancing towards Katerina for help, but finding none in her direction. That's
because she'd found the universal remote control, which apparently controled not only the flat-
panel TV above the fireplace, but the fireplace - the flames suddenly leaped and danced as she
pushed buttons - the window panes (you could deepen the shade of the glass to purple
opaque or brighten it to clear), the stereo and even the security camera in the elevator, and she
was trying to enhance the mood by making the lighting softer. 'I have a lot worse
problems

right now than dry skin, al right? In case you aren't aware of it, someone is spying on us. Not

just me, Lulu. You too. Your laptop was loaded with spyware. And I don't want to alarm you,

but I'm pretty sure it's Stark Enterprises. I don't have any proof of course . . . but who else

would it be? It's OK now, I fixed it. But you might want to get a new, non-Stark-brand

laptop. I did. And as if that's not bad enough, Gabriel Luna - remember, the guy with the

scooter, who was at the Stark Megastore grand opening, where the, um, spirit transfer took

place? Wel, he's written a song about me. And I don't even like him. He thinks I have drug

and alcohol issues. And the guy I do like -' suddenly I was fighting back tears. Just like that -

'wouldn't even look at me today at school, OK? So it doesn't matter if I have dry skin or moist

skin or NO skin. I mean, I don't even know what the point of al this is. What is the point of

being beautiful when you can't even get the guy you like to look at you?'

Lulu sucked in her breath. Then she looked at Katerina and said, 'Better cal for backup.'

Katerina nodded, laid down the remote and reached for her cellphone. Observing this, I
grabbed the nearest pilow and smashed it over my face.

'Oh no,' I wailed. 'No more makeovers. No, no, no, no!' I smacked the pilow with each no . . . not something Dr Holcombe, I was sure, would recommend.

'Relax,' Lulu said. The next thing I knew, she was plucking the pilow off my face and sitting down beside me. 'Katerina's ordering banana splits from the deli down the street. That's what I meant by backup. We always order banana splits from the deli when we have guy problems. Not good for your reflux, but you can take one of those pils of yours before you eat it. Now. What is this about Stark Enterprises, Gabriel Luna, and some guy not looking at you?'

Astonished that I wasn't about to be given a head-to-toe exfoliation, I told Lulu first about her computer, then about Gabriel, and then about Christopher and the way he'd barely spoken to me in the computer lab. When I was done, she shrugged and said, 'Wel, first of al, I never use that computer. I just think it's pretty. And Gabriel's easy too. He's in love with you.'

I nearly choked on some of my own spit.

'Lulu! No . . . that's-'

'And it's obvious what's going on with that Christopher guy,' she went on.
'Realy?' Startled, I stared at her, wide-eyed. 'What?' 

'He's frightened of his passion for you. So he's just had to shove it way, way down, so it won't show.'

I blinked. 'Lulu. He doesn't even know Nikki Howard. How can he feel passion for her?'

Lulu put both her tiny bare feet up on the coffee table and roled her head around on the back of the couch until she was staring at the ceiling. 'Oh my God. I can't believe I have to give you this speech again. It seems like I just gave you this speech last month. I did give you this speech last month. But now I have to give it to you again because of the spirit transfer. But here goes. OK, Nikki. Pay attention this time, wil you? Straight guys only feel three ways about girls.' She held up three fingers, and put one finger down each time she ticked off a Page 130 Meg Cabot: Airhead point.

'First, they love you, and they show it either by writing a song about you, like Gabriel, or asking you out, and everything is nice and fun like it should be. Second, they love you, but they're scared of their passion for you because it's so strong, like your boy Christopher, so they stuff it way, way down and ignore you, or do stupid things like make fun of
you because

don't know how to express it any other way, because they're immature little babies and

are too shy to, say, write a song about you. Or third, there's something wrong with them, and

they start out nice and loving, and then turn around and do stupid things like

sleep with other girls behind your back, like Justin Bay did. But we'll never figure out what went wrong with

them and neither will they, so it's not worth thinking about. OK? That's it. The end.'

She put down her hand. 'Any questions?'

I stared at her. She looked serious. But it was kind of hard to tell, considering it was Lulu.

So I figured I'd ask to make sure. 'Um . . . yeah, I have a question. Are you serious?'

Lulu sighed. 'OK, I can see I didn't quite get through to you. Nikki, please don't tell me

your mother never told you this.'

I shook my head. 'Um . . . no. I can't say she ever-

'God!' Lulu roled her eyes some more. 'That makes me so mad! How could she not have

said anything? That is so irresponsible! I mean, how can mothers send their daughters out into

the world to just walk around, making boys fall in love with them all day, without the slightest
idea of what they're doing? Didn't you see Spider-Man? With great power comes great responsibility! We women can't just go walking around being so awesome and not have to be careful not to make guys fall in love with us all over the place. Right, Katerina?

'Yah,' Katerina said, nodding fiercely as she bundled up Lulu's sheets for the laundry.

'My mother - much like Katerina's mother, I wouldn't doubt -' Lulu went on, 'sat me down when I was eleven and said, “Lulu, the truth of the matter is, every heterosexual boy - and probably some gay ones too, so look out, because that's just going to end in disaster - you ever meet is going to fall madly in love with you. He may not admit it, but it's true. So you have to take responsibility for that, and not do things to encourage him - unless of course you want him to fall in love with you. Because it's cruel to play with boys' emotions in that way, because no matter what anyone else says, men are the weaker sex.” Didn't your mother tell you that?'

Completely stunned by this bit of motherly advice - my mom's own advice had always been more along the lines of, Never go anywhere without enough money for a cab home,
and Don't have sex, but if you do, always use a condom - I shook my head.

'Wel,' Lulu went on, 'it turns out, even though my mom was wrong about a lot of things -

like giving me snowboarding lessons for Christmas when I turned twelve, only to go and run

off with my instructor - she wasn't wrong about that. Every heterosexual guy I've ever met -

and a few gay ones - has fallen in love with me. At least a little bit. Oh, not like they all want to

marry me or anything . . . sometimes, like in the case of my snowboard instructor, it turns out

they've wanted to marry her. But they've all thought about it. And it's true they don't

always stay in love with me, the way they ought to - but that's usually because the love they

feel for me frightens them so much, because I'm just so incredible, they feel inadequate and

end up running away . . . like Justin.'

I just stared at her. Seeing this, Lulu said, 'I'm serious. Wait and see. When the delivery
guy comes with the banana splits? Just watch when I go to pay him. He'll probably ask me

out.'

Not sure how else to respond, I said carefully, not wanting to hurt her feelings, 'Wel, Lulu

. . . thanks. I mean, for the warning? But, while I'm certain it's true that every
straight
guy you meet falls in love with you, with me that's not really been the case. At least, in my past
life. The thing is, in the real world, most girls don't have to go around worrying about every guy
they meet feeling in love with them. I could see how now that I'm Nikki, I'll have to worry,
but-

Lulu sucked in her breath, looking outraged.
'Oh yes they do!' she cried. 'If girls aren't worried about this, they're just kidding themselves! And playing with fire. This is true of all girls. Right, Katerina?'

Katerina nodded as she was folding up her massage table. 'Oh, yah,' she said, sounding
tired. 'You should meet some of my ex-husbands.'

'See?' Lulu said fiercely. 'It doesn't matter how old you are or how you look - no offence,
Katerina. Whether you're pretty or plain, or skinny or round. Guys can't help it. If you're a girl,
it's just the way it is. Guys may not want to admit that they like you. They may
act like total
butt-holes instead of admitting it -' this made me think, inexplicably, of Jason Klein - 'but
everything my mother said is totally true and applies to all girls. And it's a lot of responsibility
for us. I mean, we have to be so, so careful all the time not to break men's hearts. Men's
hearts are very fragile. Our hearts aren't nearly as delicate. Are they, Katerina?' 

'Nein,' Katerina said, banging the massage table closed. Hard.

'Now, I don't know what's going on with your little Christopher friend,' Lulu said. 'But I'm guessing maybe he's just pushed his love for you way, way down because he's so frightened of it . . . that happens a lot. Can you think of a reason why he might have done that?'

I looked at Cosabela, who'd curled up in my lap and was contentedly sleeping. I really

had no idea how I'd even ended up taking part in this lunatic conversation.

But there was something about Lulu - something so vulnerable and sweet - that made me want her theory to be true. It was certainly a very nice theory, and one that would boost the self-esteem of any girl whose mother sat her down and told it to her. Who knew? Maybe it was true. Lulu certainly seemed to believe it.

And I had no doubt that every guy she met did fall in love with her, at least a little.

I believed it was probably a little true for Nikki Howard too . . . except where Brandon Stark's dad was concerned.

But then there was what had happened that afternoon with Christopher. How could I even begin to explain how weird that had been?
'I don't know,' I said slowly. 'My sister said something about Christopher maybe having been in love with, um, Em Watts. You know, the girl who died at the Stark Megastore grand opening? Only him not having realized it until it was too late and she was . . . dead. I don't know if this is true. She was probably wrong. But they were best friends before she died. And, you know, he was there when she was killed. And my sister thinks maybe now his heart is broken.'

There was a pause as this soaked in. Then Lulu flattened a hand against her chest and looked at me with her huge Bambi eyes, suddenly ful of tears.

'That,' she said, 'is the most romantic thing I have ever heard.' She looked over at the housekeeper. 'Katerina. Isn't that the most romantic thing you've ever heard?'

Katerina had her massage things packed up by then and was now cleaning out the refrigerator, throwing out expired containers of yogurt. 'Yah,' she caled over her shoulder.

Lulu turned back to me. 'Listen,' she said, reaching out and taking my hand, 'al is not lost.

The important thing you've got to do now is make a connection with him. Show
him that you

understand what he's lost. That you feel his loss.'

I shook my head. 'But Lulu . . . how can I do that? I'm a stranger to him. Worse . . . I'm a supermodel, who represents Stark Enterprises, the company that pretty much is responsible for killing his best friend - and represents everything else evil in the world. I'm everything that Christopher hates. How can I make a connection with him when I'm someone he can't stand?

I'm telling you, it's totaly hopeless.'

'Nothing is hopeless where true love is concerned,' Lulu said, giving my hand a squeeze.

'Haven't you heard a word I've said? You've just got to give him time. He's experienced a
terrible loss. His heart has been torn in two. It's going to take love and patience to being him

back amongst the living . . . just like it took love and patience to bring you back to me . . .

even if you are a little strange now. Strange,' Lulu added hastily, 'but much nicer than you used
to be.'

I sighed. 'I don't know, Lulu. I want to think you're right, but . . . maybe, if your theory is

right, and with great power comes great responsibility, the kinder thing to do

would be to just
leave him alone.'

Lulu looked searchingly into my eyes. 'What does your heart say, Nikki?'

I felt tears fill my eyes. Because I couldn't help remembering what Mr Philips had said that day in Dr Holcombe's office - What is the locus of our identities . . . our souls, as it were? Is it the brain? Or is it the heart? Nikki Howard's brain, it's true, is no longer functioning. Her heart, on the other hand, continues to beat.

I remembered now how I'd lain my hand over Nikki Howard's heart and felt it beating. It had felt so foreign to me. I'd wondered then if it would ever feel like my own heart.

But it felt like my own heart now. It felt like my own heart now because nothing but my own heart could hurt so much. It felt like my own heart because the truth was? It was breaking.

'My heart says that I love Christopher,' I said miserably. 'But it's so hopeless, Lulu. The chances of my ever getting him even to be friends with me are nil . . . let alone the chances of us ever being anything else.'

The intercom buzzed, causing us both to jump.

'I wil get,' Katerina said, and she shuffled off to do so.

'Listen,' Lulu said, giving my hand another squeeze. 'If the delivery guy asks me
out, wil

you believe me that you have a chance with Christopher?'

I slipped my hand out from hers in order to wipe away my tears. 'Lulu. You're in a fluffy
robe and slippers. The delivery guy isn't going to-

'The delivery guy is going to ask me out,' Lulu said. 'I told you, we women have an
awesome power that we have to wield with responsibility. So this isn't fair of me, because I'm
not even interested in dating anyone right now, since I just broke up with Justin, and I need to
go see my astrologist to find out which sign I should Page 133 Meg Cabot: Airhead
concentrate on trying to date next. But I wil do it, to prove a point to you. Then wil you
believe me?'

'Fine,' I said with a shaky laugh. 'Go for it.'

The elevator doors opened, and the unsuspecting delivery guy stepped out, holding a
plastic bag.

'That'l be eleven fifty,' he said to Katerina as he handed her the bag.

'I'm not paying,' Katerina said. 'She's paying.' And she pointed at Lulu.

Lulu got up off the couch and, giving the sash to her fluffy robe a tug to tighten it,
approached the delivery guy. I couldn't say I noticed anything at al different
about her, except

that a beguiling smile had appeared on her elfin face.

But the delivery guy sure seemed to straighten up all of a sudden.

'Wel,' Lulu said to him 'helo there. Eleven fifty, you said? Hold on a second, my walet is

right here. Why, you're all wet. Is it raining out there? Do you want a towel? Here, let me get

you a towel. It's getting cold out, isn't it? I wouldn't want you coming down with something.

Then who would bring me my banana splits? I sure do love banana splits. Here, here's a
twenty. You can keep the change. And here's a big fluffy towel. What's your name?'

'Roy,' said the delivery guy in a dazed voice as he wiped off his face with the towel Lulu

had handed him.

'Roy?' Lulu said, taking the towel back. 'What a nice name. Is that Hungarian?'

'I don't know,' the delivery guy said, still sounding dazed. 'What's your name?'

'My name is Lulu,' Lulu said. 'That's with two Ls and two Us.'

'That's a pretty name,' Roy said. 'Would you want to go out with me sometime?'

My jaw dropped.

'Oh my goodness,' Lulu said. 'I'd love to! But only if my husband could come along.'

'Your husband?' Roy looked stunned.
'Come on,' the elevator attendant said in a bored voice, pulling Roy back on to the elevator. 'Let's go.'

'Bye, Roy,' Lulu said, waving. 'Don't catch a cold!' The elevator doors closed on a still-stunned Roy's face. As soon as he was gone, Lulu turned triumphantly towards me and did a little victory dance.

'There!' she cried. 'See? I told you!' I shook my head in wonder. I really couldn't believe what I'd just witnessed.

'That,' I said, truly impressed, 'was amazing. But how did you do that? You're in a bathrobe! You weren't even wearing anything low-cut or revealing.'

'I was kind and friendly to him,' Lulu said, shaking her head. 'And I exuded confidence and charm. That's what I was trying to tell you. Anyone can do it. It doesn't matter how you look or what you're wearing.' She crossed the room to the kitchen island, where Katerina had opened the bag containing our banana splits. Lulu swung herself up on to one of the stools until she was sitting in front of one of the plastic containers.

'I don't think I could do it,' I said, getting up from the couch and following her. 'I don't think I have that kind of confidence.'

'Of course you can do it, Nikki,' Lulu said, digging into her banana split with one of the
plastic spoons the deli had provided. 'You used to do it all the time, before the spirit transfer.

Sometimes you did it for the wrong reasons, just to be mean, which was why I had to give you

the speech about how with great power comes great responsibility and so on. So you can do it

with this Christopher person too, easy. You just have to have confidence. And, like I said, you

have to make a connection.'

'Fine,' I said with a sigh. 'I'll try.'

Lulu giggled and flicked some ice cream at me. She missed, and Cosabela attacked the

glob that landed on the floor.

'Hey!' I said, glaring at Lulu. 'What was that for?

'I can't believe,' she said, giggling some more, 'you're in love with a high-school boy.'

'Yeah,' I said, aiming my own spoonful of ice cream at her. 'Well, you're the freak who

believes in spirit transfers.' The glob of ice cream landed on the wall. Barking, Cosabela raced

excitedly to the other side of the kitchen to lick it up.

'Takes someone who's had one to know one,' Lulu said, and hurled the cherry from the

top of her split at me. It hit the huge plate-glass window behind me and slid slowly down it.

Cosabela barked happily at it the whole way.
'Gels,' Katerina said. 'Stop! I just clean in here! Keep this up, and no more massages.'

We cleaned up after ourselves, making sure the kitchen was sparkling when we were done.
Airhead

Twenty-four

I found Christopher alone in the computer lab before first period the next morning.

I supposed I could have waited for lunch to bring my new laptop to him, but I knew I wouldn't last that long. When you realize you need to make a connection with someone, you know you have to do it as soon as possible, or you'll lose the courage to do it at all.

And this was the only way I could think to do it.

'Um, hi,' I said gently, careful not to startle him in the middle of whatever video game he was engrossed in (Madden NFL again, I saw a minute later).

He turned in his computer chair and stared. Lulu had dressed me again, though I was getting better at doing it myself. This time I was in skinny jeans, velvet flats, a maroon cropped velvet jacket, and so many necklaces I rattled when I walked. I had only just talked Lulu out of adding a beret. That, I felt, was taking things one step too far. I was a little bit proud of my independent fashion streak.

'Hi,' he said without smiling. He had on...
sleeved polo shirt, this one grey. His hair was still wet at the back from his morning shower.

He looked so good I wanted to die.

'I brought my computer,' I said, pulling the white laptop from my Marc Jacobs tote. 'You said yesterday you could set up my email account for me . . . is this a good time?'

Christopher glanced at the wall-clock. We had fifteen minutes until Public Speaking.

'I guess so,' he said, and held out his hand for the computer.

Hmmm. If he had 'pushed his love' for me 'way, way down', as Lulu had suggested, he had really pushed it down. Why couldn't I summon up some of Lulu's awesome aimless chatter and set him at his ease? She was so good at it, while I was as awkward at it as . . . well, a
gawky teen tomboy whose brain had been stuck in a supermodel's body.

I handed Christopher my laptop and went to sit in the chair beside his. He looked down at the gleaming - and obviously brand new - white computer without comment, opened it and began typing away.

I tried to remember what Lulu had told me. Have confidence and . . . what? Make a

connection. Right.

Only how? What did Christopher and Nikki Howard have in common? Nothing. Except
that they both went to Tribeca Alternative High School.

Oh . . . and Journeyquest. Right.

'So what was your high score?' I asked him. 'On Journeyquest?'

'Forty-eight,' he said without elaboration.

This shocked me. I blurted, without thinking, 'You're a liar.'

He glanced at me, startled. 'What?'

'No way did you make it past level forty-six,' I said, completely forgetting there wasn't any way I could know this. 'How did you make it past the Dragons of Pith?' The dragons had incinerated our characters every time we'd approached them, no matter which direction we came from, barring us from making it past level forty-six. We'd searched the web for clues as to how to get past them, to no avail.

Christopher was staring at me. For the first time, he really seemed to be seeing me.

'I used the Runes of Al-Cragen,' he explained simply.

It was my turn to stare. 'The runes? No kidding? Oh my God, I can't believe I never thought of that. So you just threw them and-

'The dragons were powerless in their lair,' Christopher said. He was really looking at me now. But not like he was actually seeing me, Em. More like he was wondering what was
wrong with me, Nikki. Which made sense actualy. Because what kind of lunatic would look at

Nikki Howard and suspect Em Watts was inside her? 'What was your character's name?

Your Journeyquest character? Maybe I've seen you online.'

And I realized I'd made a blunder. I couldn't give him my online character's name, because

then he'd know it was me, Em.

But I couldn't just make one up either, because it would be too easy for him to check.

'Oh,' I said breezily 'I haven't been online Page 136 Meg Cabot: Airhead in ages. And I

doubt you'd ever have seen me, I keep realy weird hours. Besides, I don't remember it.'

I tapped my head. 'You know. The amnesia thing.'

He gave me a sceptical look and turned back to my computer screen. 'Um, yeah,' he said.

'Sure.'

Then suddenly he turned and threw me a look that was like someone accidentaly pouring

a glass of cold water in my face.

'But you remembered you played,' he said.

I could have kicked myself.

'Y-yeah, amnesia is weird that w-way' I stammered. 'Like, I remember some things. But
not others. Like . . .' 

And then, just like that, I said it. I don't know why. It was risky. It was probably foolish.

It was exactly the sort of thing, I realized, that Stark Enterprises had been using tracking

software to find. This was why it had been installed on Nikki and Lulu's computers in the first

place. This was why Stark Enterprises had been so generous with my family with the free

celphones. To make sure we weren't gabbling to the wrong people about my secret surgery.

But I wasn't typing what I was about to say, or saying it into a Stark-brand cellphone.

'. . . I remember you,' I told him.

Suddenly my heart began to hammer. Yet I couldn't seem to shut myself up. It was like my

mouth was just running away with itself.

But Lulu had said to make a connection. This wasn't the one I'd had in mind. But there it

was.

'From that day at the Stark Megastore grand opening,' I went on.

Nothing happened. I waited. But no men in black suits burst the door down. No one with

guns came bursting through the ceiling panels.

We were safe.
Christopher just stared at me, his blue eyes - so different from Gabriel's, more green

around the edges, and rimmed with light brown lashes instead of dark - wide and incredulous.

I didn't blame him. I didn't know where I was going with this either.

Shut up, Em, my brain directed my mouth. Or Nikki's mouth. Or whatever your name is

now. Just shut up. Two milion dolars. Two milion dolars.

But it was no good. The damage was done.

'You remember what happened that day?' Christopher asked finaly.

I looked down at my hands. My fingernails - which were fake, and stil painted black -

were perfect. Just like the rest of me. On the outside.

Too bad no one could see that on the inside, I was a big old mess.

'I remember you,' I said. 'I remember how you came with your friend. The one who . . .

died.'

When I said the word died, Christopher looked quickly away from me. His fingers were

frozen on the keyboard of my laptop.

But it was too late to turn back. I could only move forward.

'That must have been so awful,' I said, my heart twisting for him. 'I mean . . . not like you

probably want to remember it or anything. I'm sorry to have brought it up. I just . . . I wanted
to say something to you about it when no one else was around. You know, to tel you how
badly I felt about it.'

I had no idea if Frida was right about what was troubling Christopher. About him having
been in love with me, I mean. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe he was just stil recovering from
having seen a girl die right in front of him. Anybody would have been messed up from that.

Maybe Frida was completely wrong about Christopher having had any special feelings
beyond friendship for me. I don't know. I couldn't tel by looking at his face, because he was
keeping it turned away from me, just staring at my computer screen.

'I'm just so, so sorry that that happened,' I went on. 'I can't tel you how sorry I am. What
happened was terrible. You must . . . you must miss her a lot.'

I waited, thinking he wasn't going to reply at al, he didn't say anything for so long.

But then he did. He said, 'Yeah.'

And then his fingers started moving over the keyboard again.

A minute after that, he said, 'Wel, here you go. You're al set.'

And he closed my laptop, and handed it back to me.

Just like that.

I felt my eyes fil with tears. I couldn't help it. I couldn't believe Lulu was wrong.
It wasn't
that I'd believed her stupid theory, exactly. I mean, how dumb would you have to be to believe
that all the boys in the world are a little bit in love with you? Sure, maybe it's true for Lulu. But
why would Christopher ever have been in love with me?
God, I couldn't believe how asinine I'd been.
I turned around and stuffed the laptop back into my tote, wiping the tears away with my
sleeve so he couldn't see that I was crying.
'Thanks,' I said. 'Well. See you in Public Speaking.'
I was halfway out the door when Christopher's quiet voice stopped me in my tracks.
'Nikki,' he said.
I froze. I couldn't turn around, because then he'd have seen the tears that had escaped
from beneath my eyelids, and were trickling down my cheeks.
'Uh-huh?' I said, to the wall.
His voice was still quiet.
'She was my best friend,' he said.
The tears came gushing down my face, which I still kept hidden from him.
Suddenly I
wanted to tell him the truth so, so badly. I wanted to run over to him, throw down my bag and
fling my arms around him and say, 'Christopher, it's me! Em! I'm not dead! I'm in here! I know

it's crazy, but it's true!'

But I knew I couldn't. Two million dollars.

Instead I turned around, not caring any more if he saw I was crying, and did the one thing I

knew I shouldn't - but that I also knew I had to - do. The thing I told myself I was crazy to do.

The thing I'd tried to talk myself out of doing all morning, since I'd Page 138

Meg Cabot:

Airhead thought of it, and that I would have left without doing, if he hadn't just said those five

little words.

I reached into my tote, puled something out of it, turned around, walked back over to him

and slapped it down in front of him.

Then I turned and ran before he could ask me why I'd just dropped a sheet of glow-in-

the-dark dinosaur stickers on his desk.
Airhead

Twenty-five

'Wait . . .' Lulu leaned down to undo Cosabela's leash, which had twisted around her legs. 'Why are we bringing pizza to these people?'

'Because.' I kept my gaze on the numbers above our heads as the elevator rose higher and higher. 'I want you to meet them.'

'Are they poor or something?'

'No,' I said with a laugh. The elevator stopped and the door opened. 'I thought it would be nice to bring them dinner.'

'Oh.' Lulu folowed me down the long halway as I balanced the pizza box in one hand and tried to control Cosabela with the other. 'I thought it was, like, a charity thing.'

'No,' I said. I didn't want to mention the truth - that I felt bad for Lulu, because she didn't have any parents around . . . or no one who cared about her anyway. Except for Katerina. But Katerina was an employee.

I felt equaly badly for my parents, who I'd been sort of ignoring. Maybe pizza and a visit wouldn't make up for three days of neglect. But it was a start. That, and the new non-Stark-
brand celphones I'd brought along for each of my parents, as well as Frida.

Besides, I thought Mom should hear some of Lulu's theories. From a women's studies point of view, I thought she'd find them interesting. Or at least worth further investigation.

'I just thought eating in would be nicer than going out for a change,' I said.

'Oh,' Lulu said. She rooted around in her purse, found her compact, then checked her reflection. 'I get it. So, how'd it go with the high-school boy?'

I smiled, remembering how Christopher had yet to say a word to me about the stickers.

But he'd been looking. Oh, how he'd been looking.

'I think I made a connection,' I said. 'He's confused, but . . . ' I shrugged. 'We'll have to see how it goes.'

'They're all confused,' Lulu said with a gusty sigh. 'So why was there a cable guy in our apartment this afternoon?'

'We're getting Wi-Fi installed,' I said, stopping in front of 14L. 'Not using modem connections any more should solve our spyware problems. For now anyway. Why? Did he ask you out?'

'Of course,' Lulu said. 'But I'm supposed to go out with a Libra next and he's a Capricorn, so it will never work.'
'Are you ready?' I asked her, my finger hovering over the
bel.

'I'm ready,' Lulu said, putting away her compact. 'But are you sure you wouldn't rather go
to Nobu? Pizza always does a number on your insides. And we could go to Cave after.'

'My insides,' I said, 'are already messed up. The truth is, they're never going to match my
outsides.' I rang the bell. 'But you know what? I'm starting to think nobody's insides do.'

'I'll get it,' I heard Frida shriek inside the apartment. A second later, the door to my old
home opened, and Frida, in sweats, with face cream all over her T-zone, stared at us.

'Oh my God,' she said, her jaw slack as her gaze darted from me to Lulu and then back
again. 'Oh my God, it's . . . it's . . . it's . . .'

'Hi, Frida,' I said. 'It's me. Can you tell Mom I'm here? I brought pizza . . . and my friend
Lulu.'

'I - I - I-' Frida was so excited, she let the door bang shut in our faces. I could hear her
tearing through the apartment, screaming, 'Mo-o-om! Guess who's here?'

Lulu looked at me curiously. Then she said, 'Nikki? How do you even know these
people?'

'Lulu,' I said. 'I wouldn't even know where to begin.'