

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

MEG CABOT

Being Nikki



An AIRHEAD Novel

Eight

Great. There's nothing a girl wants more than the guy she's been crushing on since like the sixth grade or whatever to find her standing outside his building on a miserable wintry Sunday afternoon, sobbing her guts out.

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

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

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

This turned out to be a huge mistake, however. Because it revealed that Christopher was standing there in his leather jacket (when had he gotten one of those?) looking down at me (unlike my dad, Christopher was not shorter than Nikki Howard) with an adorable mixture of confusion mingled with concern on his face. He was obviously just coming home from somewhere, and in typical male fashion had remembered to wear neither a scarf nor a hat, so the sleet had caused his short blond hair to stick to his head, and the cold has turned the tips of his ears and his cheeks bright red.

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

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

“Hey, how's it going?” Christopher asked. He'd barely said three words to me since I'd slapped a set of glow-in-the-dark dinosaur stickers down in

front of him in the school's computer lab, hoping he'd get the message that I was really his best friend trapped in a supermodel's body (he didn't). But he seemed to take the fact that I'd just shown up in front of his apartment building, weeping behind my Gucci sunglasses, in stride. "Cold out today, huh?" "Um," I said. "Yeah." I tried not to look at his lips. I looked at the canopy stretching over the apartment building's driveway instead. They'd painted it an ugly looking gray. The paint was flaking off in parts of it.

"Were you shopping or something around here?" Christopher asked me. I don't suppose he could figure out any other reason why I'd be in his neighborhood. It would never occur to him that I might be stalking him, or standing here thinking about how much I wanted to kiss him. He wasn't the kind of guy who would think that girls fantasized about those kind of things. At least, not about him.

That was one of the reasons why I loved him. When I'm thinking about how much I'd like to

strangle him for being so dense as to not realize I was me, Em Watts. Just inside somebody else.

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

Did that sound reasonable? Would he believe it?

Apparently so.

“And you didn’t think to bring an umbrella when you went out,” Christopher said, with a little smile.

Apparently, he believed it. “Just like me.”

I couldn’t help lowering my gaze to his hands.

They’re gloveless and empty and huge. And would look so much better if they were somewhere on my person. I knew exactly where, too.

God, what was wrong with me? I used to think it was just Nikki’s body that was wanton. Now I was starting to wonder if my brain was catching up to it.

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

I dragged my gaze from his fingers to his face.

“One what?” What was wrong with me? I couldn’t even follow a simple conversation anymore. Either

Stark Enterprises had attached a few wires wrong when they'd put my brain into Nikki's head, or I had it really, really bad for this guy.

“Uh,” Christopher said, looking down at my feet. “I think there's something wrong with your dog.”

I glanced down at Cosabella. She was trembling all over from the cold because she'd been standing with her paws in an icy puddle, and I'd been too busy crying and lusting after my secret crush—to notice.

“Oh!” I bent down to scoop her into my arms.

“Cosy! You're freezing!”

“Why don't you come on up,” Christopher said, “and I'll get you an umbrella and you can let your dog defrost for a minute before you both head out again?”

I was looking down at Cosabella when he said this, holding her close to me in the hope that my body heat would eventually warm her enough so that she'd stop shaking.

So I was pretty sure he didn't see the blush that flooded my cheeks. At least, I hoped not. It was a

happy blush, since this stroke of luck his inviting me upstairs to his apartment, where I hadn't been since before the accident—was totally unexpected, considering the sucky twenty-four hours I'd had up till then.

“I guess,” I murmured, into the puff of fur growing out of the top of Cosabella's head.

“Thanks.”

It wouldn't be cool, of course, if I let on how I felt about his invitation I wanted to shriek with joy and dance around like a maniac. I had to act calm as we walked by Eddie the doorman. I prayed as Christopher and I passed that Eddie wouldn't say anything like, “Forget something?” Because how would I explain to Christopher what I'd been doing in his building a few minutes ago?

On the other hand, maybe it would be a good opener. I could be like, “Well, the truth is, Christopher, I was here seeing my mom and sister. Yeah, they live in this building. Because they're Em Watts's mom and sister. Get it? GET IT?”

But Eddie was preoccupied with a tenant who

had called down to complain about something, so Christopher and I just breezed by and managed to get on the elevator without incident.

It was a slightly awkward, silent ride up, but Christopher broke the tension by looking over at me as I was clutching Nikki Howard's dog and saying, "So. You don't really go everywhere in a limo, do you?"

I smiled some more into Cosy's fur. I still hadn't taken off my sunglasses I didn't want him to see the full extent of what had been going on under there. It was possible I'd escape all this without him ever knowing I'd been standing down there bawling my eyes out, not exactly the impression I wanted to make on him.

I just said, "Uh, no."

I was obviously not at my witty best when I was around Christopher. Which made no sense because I used to be able to talk nonstop around him.

This was a problem that I was going to have to do something about one day.

But right then, seeing as how I was just barely

hanging on emotionally, I figured monosyllabic answers are okay. Now was really not the time to dive into the whole, Guess what? I'm not really Nikki Howard thing. Not when I was on the verge of bursting out into hysterical sobs or laughter—at any moment.

“Yeah,” Christopher said, nodding. “I figured the rumors were bull.”

I smiled enigmatically as enigmatically as I could. I mean, let's face it: I was on the elevator—with Christopher! I was going to Christopher's apartment on a Sunday afternoon! It was just like old times! It was hard to be enigmatic when I was kind of bursting with happiness.

The elevator doors slid open on Christopher's floor which, thankfully, was seven stories up from my parents' floor, so I was unlikely to run into either my mother or Frida and he said, “It's to the right,” and held the door open for me. This alone was enough to make me realize this was nothing like old times. Christopher had never held doors open for me back when I'd been in my old body. Not that

I would have expected him to. It was just...well, it kind of caused my happiness to dry up and make me realize...

This wasn't old times. It wasn't old times at all.

"It's right here," Christopher said, pulling out his keys.

Christopher threw open the door and I went inside, nearly tearing up again at the familiar sight of piled up newspapers everywhere (the Commander read every newspaper he could get his hands on in the morning, so he'd know exactly what was going on in the world. I always thought it would be easier to use the Internet but he read that, too) and the faint scent of leather (most of the Maloneys' furniture was upholstered in soft English leather, handed down from some ancient estate long since entailed away from the family, and much too large for a tiny faculty apartment).

"Here," Christopher said. "Let me take your coat."

Trying to hide my shy smile (I know! I felt shy!

Around Christopher, of all people!), I pulled off my gloves and began untwining my scarf, then

shrugged off my leather jacket but not before kneeling down to help Cosabella off with hers, first. The one thing I didn't take off, when I was done disrobing both of us, and had handed everything to Christopher to stack on the antique bench in the front entranceway, was my sunglasses. My excitement wasn't the only thing I was trying to hide.

“Have a seat,” Christopher said, when I followed him into the living room. He shoved a stack of the Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post out of the way, just letting them crash to the floor, in order to make room for me on the cracked brown leather couch. “Do you want some coffee or tea or hot chocolate or something?”

Refreshments. He was offering me refreshments. Like I was a real guest.

Which in a way I was, I guess. I always should have been...Em Watts, girl. Not Em Watts, sexless friend from seven floors down.

For some reason, however, that had never seemed to occur to Christopher. Not until I started wearing

much tighter shirts. In someone else's body.

“Uh, some tea would be great,” I said, putting Cosy down. She was better now that we were inside, where it was warm. She'd stopped shaking and was looking around for a place to curl up and take a nap. “Could I just use your bathroom for a second?”

Christopher said sure and showed me where it was, and I followed him, pretending I didn't know where I was going, even though of course I'd been in his bathroom a thousand times before.

Once safely inside, I shut the door and whipped off my sunglasses and squinted at my reflection in the shaving cream-flecked mirror above the sink (Christopher and his dad had a housekeeper, but she only visited every other week. Or at least she used to. Judging by the mess, it was hard to tell if she still came at all anymore).

Actually, I didn't look that bad. You could barely even tell I'd been crying. I wiped off a little mascara where it had smudged. Just a wave of the lip gloss from my Miu Miu tote (which I really only kept

there to prevent chapping, because you don't know how the makeup artists get on your case when you presented yourself to them with chapped lips, which they then had to exfoliate), and I was good to go. I gave myself a smile for luck, and noticed how the bathroom smelled like Barbasol, Christopher's shaving gel of choice. I stood there and inhaled it for a while, because it smelled like him.

Yeah. I was that far gone. I couldn't even be mad at him for treating Nikki better than he had ever treated me. Because I realized he just didn't know any better. He hadn't understood what he'd had in me until I was gone.

Except that I'm not gone. That was what he hadn't figured out yet. Though how I was going to let him know that in a way he was going to be able to comprehend—was what I hadn't figured out yet. But checking for tear stains wasn't the only reason I'd gone into the bathroom, of course. I reached into my tote and pulled out my pocket bug detector and turned it on. It seemed almost too much to hope that Stark hadn't hit the Maloneys' place as

well as my parents. But since I hadn't yet been able to establish any kind of meaningful contact with Christopher, there was always a chance they hadn't bothered to slip any surveillance equipment in here. Except...that they had. At least if the antennae was working properly. The signal was strong and steady. Even after I smacked it a few times.

Geez! Thanks, Stark. Thanks a lot.

Sighing, I put away the detector, washed my hands and came out. Well, at least I'd dodged a bullet in the form of any embarrassing questions about why I might have been weeping. Christopher couldn't have noticed my little crying jag outside.

"So, why," Christopher asked, after I'd settled onto the couch, and he'd come out of the kitchen with a steaming mug of mint tea for me in one hand, and a cup of coffee for himself in the other, "were you crying down there, anyway?"

Nine

I stared at him.

Great. I wasn't going to tell him. I wasn't going to

tell him a thing.

“I wasn’t crying,” I said, taking the mug from him.

Oh, excellent response, Em! Score one for you.

“Yeah, you were,” he said. He sat down on the other end of the couch, after first kicking off the Los Angeles Times and the Seattle Intelligencer. Cosabella, who had made herself at home on the cushion between us, watched the individual sections of the paper fall to the parquet floor with her ears perked in curiosity. “I mean, I guess you could try to say that your eyes were just watering with the cold. But it looked pretty obvious to me that you were crying.”

I stared at him speechlessly. What was there for me to say, after all? I was busted. I took a tiny sip of the hot tea and hoped to find inspiration in its mint flavor. Except...no. Nothing.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, of course,” Christopher went on. “But I don’t see what you’ve got to lose.

I don’t know anybody you know, so it’s not like I’m going to tell anyone.”

I looked around the apartment, half afraid a paparazzo or even someone from Stark was going to pop out from behind a piece of furniture and snap my photo. Christopher had barely spoken three sentences to me since I'd come out of my coma and started attending Tribeca Alternative again. Why would they put transmitters in his home? Even Stark could see he was more interested in McKayla Donofrio than he was in me. What was their problem?

“My dad’s at his weekend office hours right now,” Christopher said, seeming to read my thoughts although not entirely correctly. “Last day before finals. All his students are panicked.”

“Oh,” I said. I wished he’d read my other thoughts. The ones where I wanted him to put down that coffee mug and kiss me. And realize that I was his old friend Em and not Nikki Howard. Although that might put a damper on the whole kissing scenario, since Christopher had never expressed the slightest interest in making out with me when I’d been alive. In my old body, I mean.

“It’s just,” I said, slowly. Why not tell him? Why not tell him I was his old friend Em, that I wasn’t dead after all? I couldn’t tell him verbally, because somewhere in this apartment was a listening device. But I could write the truth down, couldn’t I? Then destroy the evidence when I was through?

Yeah, why not? Christopher wouldn’t tell anyone. Except his dad, of course. Who was such a conspiracy theorist that, when he found out his apartment was bugged as he would, since I’d have to tell Christopher that’s why I was writing, instead of just telling him, my secret he’d surely insist on going to every news organization in the country with the story. The Commander hated Stark almost as much as I did. There was no way Christopher would ever get him to keep quiet about what they’d done to me...or the fact that they’d bugged his apartment.

And then Mom and Dad would be ruined, if not have to serve actual jail time, for breaking the contract they’d signed. Those millions of dollars they’d have to pay back for my surgery, legal fees,

and fines? Even Nikki Howard didn't have that much in her bank account...not that I'd have access to that money anymore, after the Commander went to CNN.

No. Just no. I couldn't tell Christopher the truth. Not now.

And the way things were going? Maybe not ever.

"It's just," I said, again, stalling for time. What could I say? What? How about...well, some semblance of the truth, I guess? Just not the whole truth. "...I got some bad news today."

"Really?" Christopher looked concerned. This was how he used to look when I'd tell him about a bad grade, or a fight with my sister, or my character losing a life on Journey quest.

That's when I realized... What was I saying? I couldn't tell him about what had just happened with my mom...that I was upset that I couldn't go to Florida for winter break with my family. Because they weren't supposed to be my family anymore. But I had to say something now that I'd blurted out the thing about getting some bad news. Only what?

That I'm a Stark Angel? Oh, God, no... Christopher wouldn't have the slightest bit of sympathy.

Anything but that. But what else?

"My mom's missing," I heard myself say.

Oh. Great. Okay, yeah, so I didn't mean to blurt out that. But it was too late to stuff the words back in my mouth now.

Christopher stared at me, his blue eyes wide.

"Your mom is missing?" he echoed.

Only when the words were out of his mouth did it occur to me that possibly this was the part I shouldn't have mentioned after all. Maybe leading with being a Stark Angel would have been better.

"We're not close," I said, lamely. "She's, uh—" Wow. How do I get myself out of this one? "—been missing awhile, and I only just found out because we don't talk on a regular basis—"

Then I realized maybe this wasn't the most tactful thing to say, either. Christopher and his own mother weren't close, due to his having chosen, when his parents were divorcing, to live with his father and not his mother. But this, he'd once confided to

me, wasn't because of any particular dislike of his mother or a surfeit of affection for his dad, but because his younger sister had chosen to live with their mother, and Christopher had felt it only fair that one child side with their father, who'd also sued for full custody. Which is how he'd ended up living in my building.

"How long has she been missing?" he asked. He was absently petting Cosabella, who'd fallen asleep with her muzzle on his knee.

"A couple of months," I replied, a little surprised by the intensity of his interest. But then I guess it would be alarming to hear that someone's mom was missing. If you were anyone except my agent Rebecca, that is. "Maybe...three."

Christopher got a faraway look in his blue eyes.

"Right around the time of the accident," he murmured, as he stared off in the direction of the television. "It makes sense."

My eyebrows went up. "Excuse me?" I asked.

His gaze snapped back towards me. "Nothing," he said. But it was clear it wasn't nothing.

“What have you done to try to find her?” he asked.

“Has anyone filled out a missing person’s report?”

“Um,” I said. “Yeah. I guess.”

“You guess?” Christopher looked confused. I couldn’t blame him. I was confused, too. What was going on, exactly? I was really starting to wonder if maybe grief over my death had sent Christopher around the bend. Chopping off all his hair the way he had it used to be to his shoulders wasn’t the only change I’d seen in him since I died.’ He’d gotten too intense, spent too much time alone in the computer lab in school, not talking to anyone. Including me, despite my efforts to draw him out.

“Well, my brother’s the one who’s looking into it, really,” I said. “All I’ve done is call my cell phone service provider,” I added. “To see if she called and maybe I missed it—”

Christopher shook his head. “It could take months before they get back to you with that information.”

I looked at him and shrugged. “I know,” I said.

“But what else can I do?” I hated feeling this helpless. Especially in front of Christopher. Back

in my old body, I'd always made a point to do everything for myself in front of him, like if I showed the slightest female weakness, he might think less of me somehow. If there was a bug on the floor? I squashed it. If something was too high for me to reach on a shelf? I got a chair and climbed it. If the lid to the peanut butter jar was on too tight? I'd have gone all the way to my own apartment and asked my dad to open it before I'd have asked Christopher.

But now...now I was wondering if this had been the wisest strategy. I mean, did you really get guys by acting like you didn't need them? That had not been how I'd gotten Brandon to kiss me the other night. I'd asked him for help getting back to New York, and next thing I knew, we'd started making out, and he'd asked me to be his girlfriend.

If I wanted to make out with Christopher, wouldn't it have behooved me to have acted like I needed him? Just a little bit?

And okay, I hate girls like that the Whitney Robertsons of the world. But hey. Didn't she have

the hottest boyfriend in school (if you considered Polo-wearing, thick-necked jocks hot)?

“McKayla Donofrio’s father is with the Office of the Attorney General,” Christopher offered, obviously trying to be helpful. “Maybe he could do something for your mom.”

McKayla Donofrio? How did Christopher know what her dad did for a living? Although knowing what a snob McKayla was, she’d probably bragged about it in class one day when I hadn’t been there. She bragged all the time about being a National Merit Scholar and head of Tribeca Alternative’s Business Club. She even bragged about being lactose intolerant. Having a father in the Office of the Attorney General would be only slightly less prestigious to a girl like McKayla.

On the other hand, maybe Christopher and McKayla were dating. Hadn’t I caught her staring at him more and more often as the semester had gone on, especially since he’d cut his hair and started wearing more black (what was up with that, anyway)? And hadn’t I seen his gaze stray more than

once in her direction? But then, I'd just thought he was staring blankly at whatever was in front of him out of abject boredom.

There couldn't be anything going on between the two of them. There could not.

And yet...

Suddenly, I felt like crying all over again. The thought of Christopher with McKayla on top of everything else was more than I could handle.

And that's exactly what I needed, someone from the Office of the Attorney General of the state of New York poking around in Nikki Howard's business. Please.

"Hey." Christopher reached out and laid a gentle hand on my shoulder. I was so startled I'd been busy picturing the two of them at one of McKayla's Business Club meetings, his fair head and her dark one bent over some kind of PowerPoint presentation together, I'd almost forgotten he was there that I jumped. "Are you all right?"

"I I'm fine," I said. My eyes were filled with tears again. I reached up hastily to wipe them away.

“Just...allergies. Sorry. I should probably go....”

I got up, wanting to leave before I had even less control over my tear ducts. I was turning into a total basket case. Also, allergies? In winter? Right. Brilliant, Em.

“You’re really upset about this,” Christopher said, gazing up at me. He hadn’t fallen for the allergy excuse. “Aren’t you?”

“Well,” I said, sniffing. Did I feel a twinge of guilt over the fact that he was mistaking my tears for concern over Nikki Howard’s missing mom, when they were, in fact, tears for him? Yeah. But so what? It was kind of hard to feel bad about it when he was gazing at me so worriedly with those bright blue eyes of his. “I mean, yeah. She’s my mother.” Oooh, nice one, Em. Laying it on kind of thick, are you?

“Look.” Christopher seemed to come to some kind of decision in his head. “Before you go... just let me try something.”

He got up—jostling Cosabella, who sighed and curled up into a ball—and crossed the living room,

heading down the hall. I realized he was heading toward his bedroom. What was going on?

“Uh. Christopher?” I called after him when a few minutes passed, and he didn’t reappear. Clearly he wasn’t just getting me an umbrella.

“In here,” he called back. “It’s okay. Come on in.” I followed the sound of his voice, wondering what on earth he was up to, since getting me an umbrella shouldn’t have taken that long.

I found myself freezing in his bedroom doorway, however.

“All of this would be a lot easier,” Christopher was muttering, for the chair in front of his desktop, “if we could crack their firewall—”

But I was barely listening. That’s because sitting there on top of Christopher’s messy bookshelf, which was sagging in the middle because there were so many hardbacks piled onto it, was a framed photo of...

Me.

Not McKayla Donofrio. Not Nikki Howard. Me. Emerson Watts.

It was the photo they'd used at my memorial service. It wasn't very flattering, in my opinion. It was a school photo, the one I'd told Mom not to even bother buying, because in the proof one of my teeth was doing this weird, snaggle thing (I always thought I'd have time to get that fixed one day. No such luck). She'd gone ahead and bought it anyway because...well, of what happened.

And now a copy of it was sitting in Christopher's bedroom, on such prominent display that you couldn't go anywhere, really, without feeling like it was looking at you.

"Hey, Felix." Christopher, ignoring me, was speaking into his computer.

A squeaky male preteen's voice came on over the computer, and I saw Christopher's fourteen-year-old cousin Felix, the one who was under house arrest in Brooklyn for some kind of computer hacking crime, on Christopher's monitor.

"Didn't you just leave here?" Felix wanted to know.

"What'd you do, forget something?"

"I got my friend Nikki here," Christopher said.

“Her mother is missing. Can you run her Soc and see if anything comes up?”

“A girl?” Felix’s voice rose an octave. “You got a girl in your room?”

“Yeah, I got a girl in my room,” Christopher said in a calm voice. He didn’t blush or anything, the way he might have in the old days. This, to me, was only clearer proof there was something going on between him and McKayla.

But then...what was with the picture of me?

To tell the truth, I couldn’t believe the way he was... well, taking charge. That just wasn’t Christopher. Christopher was Doritos and the Discovery channel, not ordering people around and Skyping his cousin to consult about “running” a missing woman’s Social Security number.

This change in him was kind of freaking me out. In a good way. Except for the photo of the old me, and the McKayla part.

“Can you help her?” Christopher asked his cousin.

“Of course I can help her,” Felix said. He sounded like a kid. Which wasn’t that unusual, since I could

see from the monitor that that's what he was... skinny neck, tufted black hair, pimples, and all. "Let me see her."

"You don't need to see her," Christopher said.

"I want to see her," Felix said. "I have to sit cooped up in here all day by myself. If you've got a girl in your room, I want to see one."

"You can't—" Christopher began.

I took a quick step so that I was viewable in the lens of the camera on Christopher's monitor. "Hi, Felix," I said, just to shut him up.

Felix let out an expletive and abruptly disappeared from view. "Chris," he whispered from somewhere off camera. "That's Nikki Howard. You didn't tell me the girl in your room was Nikki Howard."

"Well," Christopher said, sounding faintly amused.

"The girl in my room is Nikki Howard."

"How," Felix wanted to know, from wherever he was hiding, "did you get Nikki Howard to come into your room?"

Christopher looked over at me. He was smiling a little. "She basically followed me here," he joked.

I couldn't help smiling a little back at him. If he was doing all this to make me stop crying, it was working. Wow. I should have tried a few tears on Christopher years ago. I probably could have gotten him to change the channel all those times he'd insisted on watching those boring episodes of Top Gear. "Do you think you can help her, Felix, or not?"

"Of course I can help her." Felix reappeared on the computer monitor. He'd combed his stick-uppy black hair and put on a different shirt. "Hey, there, Nikki," he said, in a much deeper tone of voice. "How you doing?"

"Uh," I said, laughing a little, in spite of my unease about the situation. "I'm fine."

"Great. That's great," Felix said. "So, just give me your mom's Social Security number, and we can get down to business."

I glanced at Christopher. "The police already checked this stuff out, I think—"

"The police!" Felix's scorn was explosive. "You think they have the resources I do, even though

they did take away my Wi-Fi connection and now I have to piggyback off my neighbor's? Trust me, unless she's dead or living off the grid, I'll find her. Just cough up the digits, babe." Christopher gave him a warning wag of his finger, and Felix apologized. "Sorry, I mean, Miss, Howard."

"I don't actually have that number on me," I explained. Then, seeing Felix's look of dejection, I added quickly, "But I guess I can get it—"

"Great!" Felix perked right up. "As soon as you do, text me! Or maybe you could come over, actually. My mom makes really good chili—"

Christopher reached out and switched the monitor off. Felix disappeared in a poof.

"He's kind of a freak," Christopher explained. "But he really does know what he's doing, believe it or not. That's why the judge gave him six months instead of just a slap on the wrist. My dad sends me over there every Sunday to try to be a good influence on Felix, but I think it's the other way around. Anyway, you can just give the number to me when you get it. And I'll make sure he gets it."

“Uh, thanks,” I said, glancing up at my picture, which was leering toothily down at us. I glanced hastily away from it. “This is really nice of you.” Christopher shrugged. “You can make it up to me, actually. I mean, if you want to.”

I could? All sorts of ideas how I could make it up to him went through my head. The tongue trick, even though I still didn’t know what it was, sprang foremost to mind, which was disturbing. I had to go sink down on Christopher’s tightly made bed (the Commander believed a tidy bed was a sign of a tidy mind) before my knees gave out from under me. “Oh?” I managed to squeak out, when I could finally speak.

“Yeah,” Christopher said. “So. Just how loyal are you to your boss, anyway?”

This was such an unexpected question, I blurted, “Who?” without thinking.

“Your boss,” Christopher said again. “Richard Stark. How much do you like him?”

Taken completely aback, I stammered, “W-Why?” “You work for a company that reported three

hundred billion dollars in sales last year, most of the profit of which went to line your boss's pocket. I'm just wondering," Christopher said, calmly, "how you feel about him."

I was so transfixed by the blueness of Christopher's eyes, I heard myself saying, before I could stop myself, "He wants me to parade around in a ten-million-dollar bra made out of diamonds on national television. How do you think I feel about him?"

Christopher smiled. When he smiled, something strange happened to my insides. It was like they turned to liquid.

"That's what I was hoping you'd say."

And then he told me what he planned to do. And what he needed from me.

And my world, which had already been upside, flipped over one more time.

"Felix and I have been trying to find a wormhole to get us into Stark's corporate mainframe for ages," he said. "But we haven't been able to. Their firewall is that good. So instead of a back door, I

think we're going to have to try going in through the front door." Christopher had stopped smiling and regarded me seriously. "Do you think you could get us a username and password for someone who works at Stark Enterprises? Someone high up would be best, but at this point we'll take anyone...." I just stared at him.

This was what he wanted from me? Was all I could think. A lousy username and password?

It so figured. Why was I even surprised? I mean, the guy had a picture of a dead girl on his bookshelf. Not a small one, either, but an eight by ten glossy, with eyes that followed you everywhere you go.

Great. Now I was starting to get jealous of myself.

I stood up. Then I walked over to Christopher's bedroom window. To his surprise, I leaned over and yanked it open, letting in a blast of cold air, as well as the steady patter of the sleet and loud traffic sounds from Bleecker Street, below. The acoustic interference, I hoped, would make it hard for anyone listening to our conversation to hear what we were saying.

“What are you doing?” he asked me curiously. He had to raise his voice a little to be heard over the traffic.

I waved my hand around my head. “Did it ever occur to you,” I asked, “that they could be listening?”

Christopher stared at me. “Who could?”

“Stark,” I whispered. My heart gave little thump as I said it. Not so much because of the thought of Stark listening to us, but because Christopher was looking at me...really looking at me, like he was actually seeing me for the first time.

Only, of course, he wasn't.

Christopher laughed. “Stark? Here? Are you serious?”

I was dead serious. But of course, I couldn't tell him that. Especially not now.

“Christopher, you shouldn't underestimate them,” I said instead. “They...they know things.”

He laughed some more. “You're paranoid.”

“Maybe,” I said, going back to my perch on his bed.

“Maybe you should try being a little paranoid, too.

What you're talking about...it's crazy. I mean...what are you guys going to do once you get into their system?"

He looked surprised.

"Take it down," he said in a What else? tone of voice.

Take it down. Like it should be so obvious. Also like it would be that easy. Like he was Robin Hood, and Stark Enterprises was a coach full of gold he was going to rob.

"Isn't that a little...childish?" I pushed some of my hair behind my ears as I tried to figure out how to phrase what I was going to say next without offending him. "I mean, okay, yeah, so their system goes down for a few hours. You'll make some Stark cell phone owners mad, whatever. Maybe you'll get on Google News. But...what's the point? Just to show you can? Your computer is bigger than their computer? Big deal."

"No, no," Christopher interrupted, shaking his head. "You don't understand. I mean, the point is to take it down. To take Stark Enterprises down. Forever."

Ten

It would have been obvious to anyone looking at me as I staggered into school Monday morning just before the late bell rang, a cup of tea clutched in one hand and my Marc Jacobs tote full of overdue assignments and my MacAir in the other, that I hadn't had a good weekend. I know I looked particularly heinous. I'd tossed and turned all night, unable to sleep not just because Lulu Collins was hogging my Frette sheets and duvet, but because the guy I'm hopelessly in love with? Yeah, well, he's in love, too.

Only not with McKayla Donofrio, it turns out. He's in love with a dead girl.

Oh, and did I mention that he plans to obliterate the company I work for? Yeah.

Not, of course, that I myself was all that enamored of Stark Enterprises. But I didn't want to destroy it, necessarily. After all, I actually liked a few people who worked there.

Not that Christopher had been kind enough to

share with me yesterday the details of what he and his cousin Felix intended to do once they'd gotten the information they need. Why would he tell me? I was just some bubble-headed model.

He hadn't put it that way, of course. But it was clear he didn't think I'd "understand" and that I was "better off not knowing."

Of course, part of that was my own fault for pretending not to understand the simplest things about computers when I'd first "met" him.

But there hadn't been any pretense in my reaction to his statement that he was going to take down Stark Enterprises. I couldn't help myself. I'd been honestly horrified. I'd blurted out the first thing that sprang into my mind, and that was, "But...why?" Christopher had just smiled in an enigmatic way and said, "I have my reasons."

I hadn't missed the way his gaze had flicked, just for an instant, towards my photo.

Great. Just great! It was perfectly obvious now what was going on. My death, as had the deaths of so many tragic heroines before me, had caused another

one...the death of Christopher, only on the inside. His heart had died, and created where fun, joyful Christopher used to be the Christopher I had loved, the Christopher with whom I'd played so many rounds of Journeyquest, the Christopher whom I'd longed to notice me as not just a gal pal, but as a girl—an evil supervillain.

Why had I been so surprised? It happened all the time in comic books. Christopher was now going to use his powers for evil instead of good in order to avenge my death. What other explanation could there be?

Just to be sure, I'd asked, "Well, is one of the reasons what happened to your friend who died at that Stark Megastore? Because I'm pretty sure that was the fault of the protester who shot that paintball at the plasma screen she was standing under."

Christopher had looked at me without expression and said, "And who was responsible for making sure that plasma screen was secured well enough to the ceiling that an assault from a paintball attack

wouldn't cause it to come crashing down?"

"Well, Stark," I'd said. "But—"

"Stark has to be held accountable for what it did."

Oh my God! I couldn't believe how upsetting this was.

But also, in a way, how kind of hot it was. I mean, what girl wouldn't want a guy to go on a wild computer hacking rampage against a majorly environmentally irresponsible corporation, just for her? Especially one that was basically holding her in corporate slavery to it, and which had just the day before almost made her get eaten by sharks.

The only problem was, he wasn't doing it for me.

Well, I mean, he was, but he didn't know it. Because he thought Em Watts was dead.

And now more than ever, I couldn't tell him I wasn't. Because it was obvious he'd completely lost it. Who knew what he'd do if he knew the truth? In seconds he might spill it all over the blogosphere, in order to get his "revenge" on Stark.

And where would that leave me? And my parents? In bankruptcy court, that's where. Oh, sure, Stark

would go down.

But so would the Watts family.

It was bad enough Christopher had been doing all this crazy virus programming and Stark probably knew it, given that they were bugging his place, and there I was, sitting in his apartment. I just couldn't believe any of it was happening. Christopher, my sweet, funny best friend Christopher, had turned into this dark, cynical crusader for global justice? Since when?

“Do you really think,” I'd said, trying to figure out how I was going to handle this, “that this is what your friend Em, I think you said her name was would want? I mean, what if you get caught? You could get house arrest, like your cousin. Or worse, actual jail time, if you're tried as an adult.”

“I don't care,” Christopher had said, shaking his head. “It'd be worth it.”

A chill had gone up my spine. It was obvious now that Christopher's transformation was a hundred percent complete. All that was missing was his black cape and a jagged facial scar.

“You’d risk possible incarceration,” I’d asked in astonishment, “for a dead girl?”

His next words had rocked my world to its core: “She was worth it,” he’d said, simply.

If I could have picked up a knife and jammed it in Em Watts’s heart right then, I would have, too, I hated her so much at that moment. Never mind that Em Watts was me. I couldn’t look at her picture a second longer. I’d had to get out. I’d had to get out of Christopher’s lair-slash-bedroom. Especially because of the whole still wanting-to-kiss-him thing.

And he so very definitely not wanting to kiss me. Because he was in love with a dead girl.