

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

MEG CABOT

Runaway



An AIRHEAD *Novel*

Runaway
MEG CABOT

FOR BENJAMIN

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One

SO ACCORDING TO THE TABLOIDS, I'M on a secret love getaway (not so secret anymore now, though, is it? Thank you, *Us Weekly*) with Brandon Stark, the only son and sole heir of billionaire Robert Stark, currently the fourth-richest person in the world, after Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and Ingvar Kamprad (who founded IKEA, in case you didn't know).

There are paparazzi staking out the oceanside mansion where Brandon and I are holed up. They're hiding in the dunes all along the beach. They're stretched out in ditches up and down the road, their telephoto lenses pointed through tufts of sea grass in the hopes of capturing me topless on a chaise longue by the pool (like that's going to happen).

I even saw one perched in a tree, trying to get a shot of me and Brandon Stark together that time we came out of the house to go grab some takeout at the local crab shack.

It's big news, I guess, the Face of Stark and the heir to the Stark fortune hooking up with each other over the holidays. My roommate, Lulu, texted me that she heard a picture of us together can fetch upward of ten grand...as long as I'm facing the camera and smiling.

So far, Lulu says, there hasn't been a single shot of me facing the camera and smiling. Not in any magazine or on any website anywhere.

I know people are wondering how that's even possible. I'm the girl who has it all, right? The little white poodle, yawning delicately at my feet; the thick, luxurious blond hair; the perfect body; the gorgeous boyfriend with the limitless credit card, who seems to care so much about me that he'll buy out the local women's boutique in my size just because I said I can't come down to dinner because I have nothing to wear.

That same gorgeous boyfriend was currently pacing up and down the hallway outside my room, so eager was he for me to join him that he could hardly wait to escort me down to the sumptuously set modern steel-and-glass table.

"How are we doing in there?" he asked, tapping on the door for the umpteenth time this hour at least.

"Not so good," I croaked. I glanced at my reflection in the mirror hanging over the dressing table in front of me. "I think I have a fever."

"Really?" Brandon sounded sweetly concerned. The best boyfriend a girl could ask for. "Maybe I should call a doctor."

"Oh," I said through the door, "I don't think that's necessary. I think I just need fluids. And bed rest. It would probably be better if I stayed in my room tonight."

I knew anyone who might have been watching— for instance, through a high-powered telephoto lens— could only have been thinking, *What is wrong with this girl?* After all, I was faking sick to get out of dinner with the hot son of one of the richest guys in America, while staying in his palatial, Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired mansion.

It came complete with a huge heated outdoor pool (with vanishing edges, so that the water appeared to be dropping off into the horizon). Along one wall there was an aquarium big enough to hold Brandon's pet stingray and shark (it so figures that Brandon Stark would have a pet shark, doesn't it?), a home theater built to seat twenty, and a four-car garage that housed Brandon's European sports car collection, with a brand-new buttercup yellow Lamborghini Murciélago, a Christmas gift from Dad, of which Brandon was immensely proud.

Any other girl would have swapped places with me in a second.

But no other girl had my same problems.

Well...maybe one other girl.

"Don't think this means I like you," Nikki informed me, bursting into my room from the connecting door to hers, wearing a brightly colored maxidress, a leather motorcycle jacket, fringed wedges, and an enormous jeweled "statement" necklace that looked like a drunk frat boy threw up on her chest.

"No worries," I said. Nikki had made it more than clear that she doesn't like me — that she doesn't want to spend one waking minute with me unless she absolutely has to.

"It's just that your mirror is bigger than mine," she said, clip-clopping across my room to check out her reflection in my mirror, "and I want to see how I look in this."

"You look nice," I said.

I was lying.

Nikki beamed at the compliment I'd given her, though. This was a relief. It was the first time she'd smiled at me— or at least in my direction— since the private plane we took to get to this subtropical resort town touched down a few days earlier.

And who could blame her, really? It wasn't just that it was boring for her, being cooped up in this house, palatial as it was. She couldn't go into town, or one of the paparazzi might get a snap of her.

And even though they wouldn't have any idea who she was if her photo showed up in a magazine, someone who had known her from her body's previous life might recognize her and wonder what the heck a girl who was supposed to be dead was doing walking around alive and kicking in ugly statement necklaces.

Because, like me, Nikki is a member of the Walking Dead.

But unlike me, Nikki's body was supposed to be dead and *buried*.

"You think?" Nikki stared at herself in the full-length mirror on the far wall of my room, across from a bank of floor-to-ceiling windows that face the curling waves of the Atlantic— black and ominous-looking this time of night— just a few dozen yards away.

Then she distractedly tucked a strand of her medium-length auburn hair behind her ear and made a face.

"Ugh," she said. "What is the point? Why do I even try?"

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “You look amazing.”

Okay, I was exaggerating. But only a little. Actually, if she’d just worn makeup that suited her new skin tone, and quit flatironing her hair until it didn’t have a hint of body left in it, and put on some clothes that weren’t my castoffs from the boutique Brandon had raided on my behalf— which she didn’t seem to realize were way too tight and long on her— she’d have been totally cute.

But no way was I going to tell her anything that wasn’t one hundred percent positive. I wanted Nikki on my side even more than Brandon did.

“But do you think Brandon will like me in this?” Nikki asked anxiously.

Now we were getting to the root of the problem: the whole reason why I was faking sick...so she could get some one-on-one time with Brandon, without me being there to hog the limelight from her.

“Of course he will,” I lied.

He’d better. I knew how desperately she craved Brandon’s attention.

Not that I could blame her. Really, who wouldn’t be in love with Brandon Stark? He had everything most girls could want in a guy: stunning good looks, an enviable sports car collection, a Greenwich Village brownstone *and* a beach house in the tropics, not to mention access to a private jet to go from one to the other.

Brandon really would make some girl a great boyfriend.

Except for the part about him being a low-down, two-faced snake, of course.

I stared at the back of Nikki’s skull as she turned toward the mirror again. I couldn’t help lifting my hand to finger the spot on my own scalp where, more than three months earlier, surgeons at the Stark Institute for Neurology and Neurosurgery had cut open my head, slipped out Nikki’s brain, and inserted my own.

It sounded like something out of a cheesy made-for-TV movie, one that would be awesome to curl up in front of and watch on a rainy Sunday afternoon with a big bowl of popcorn.

Except for the fact that it was actually happening in my real life.

And little had I known that at the exact same time my brain was being inserted in Nikki’s body, one of those neurosurgeons was secretly taking Nikki’s brain and slipping it into the head of this girl standing in front of me.

Nikki— her brain, anyway— was supposed to have died.

And the secret she carried was supposed to have died along with her.

Unfortunately for Mr. Stark— but fortunately for Nikki— Nikki was still very much alive. Both her brain and her body. Just in two separate locations.

The secret she knows, however? That’s still a secret.

And Brandon hasn’t done a very good job of sweet-talking her out of it...mainly because he’s been too distracted lately, trying to sweet-talk me.

And God knew, Nikki hated me way too much because of that to utter a barely

civilized word to me, no matter how often I've tried to get her to open up to me.

I wondered how much of that is because her scar still aches sometimes, the way mine does.

"I'm sure you're right," Nikki said, her nose in the air as she left my room. "Brandon loves the color blue."

He does? This was news to me.

But I was finding out that there was a lot about Nikki Howard's ex-boyfriend that was news to me. His favorite color was the least of it, really.

What about the fact that he has a secret beachside lair where he likes to stash girls he's either kidnapped against their will, the way he has me, or intends to seduce, then blackmail to get what he wants, the way he does Nikki...

...which, in this case, is information to use against his father so Brandon can take over his company himself? Super!

Yeah. If it turned out Brandon Stark also likes to dress up as Strawberry Shortcake while playing croquet with his miniature pony collection, I totally wouldn't be surprised anymore.

"Em?" Brandon thumped on my door again.

"What?" I said, more sharply than I meant to. I had a headache that I really wasn't faking.

"I think I found a cure for what you have," Brandon said through the door.

I looked up in surprise at this.

Because there is no cure for what I have, since what I have is one hundred percent fake.

"Really?" I said. "What is it?"

"It's called you better get out here," Brandon said, in a different tone of voice, "or you'll be sorry."

Oh. Right. I forgot.

Because the tabloids have got it wrong.

I'm not on a secret love getaway. I may not exactly be behind bars.

I'm not sporting shackles or handcuffs.

There aren't even men in black suits standing on either side of me, speaking into little mini-microphones in their sleeves.

But I'm Brandon Stark's prisoner, just the same.

Two

I OPENED THE DOOR AND STOOD THERE in the long black velvet evening gown Brandon had had sent over for that evening's festivities— a gourmet dinner being prepared by the Cordon Bleu-trained chef Brandon had stolen away from a nearby five-star hotel to come work for him for the week.

One thing about Brandon Stark: He doesn't mess around when he's trying to impress a lady.

The question was, why couldn't he figure out the right girl to impress? It was Nikki he was supposed to be trying to win over, not me.

Not that he'd even have to try that hard with her. If he'd expended *half* as much energy on her as he kept expending on me, he'd have had her eating out of his hand.

Why couldn't he understand that?

Probably for the same reason he thinks it's cool to hang out in Ed Hardy shirts with reality show stars on his dad's yacht: He's kind of stupid.

And yet at the same time, he's completely evil.

It turns out the two combined are deadly. Well, for me.

Brandon didn't say anything for a minute. He just stared at me, his eyes blank as the spinning beach balls of death Mac users always got when an application on their computer wasn't responding.

Which was good. It meant plan B— which I'd come up with in case plan A, faking sick, didn't pan out— was working. I may seem like a defenseless blonde on the outside, but I actually do have a few weapons in my arsenal.

One of them was the Armani I was wearing. I realized the moment I saw it on the rack of clothes that had been sent over from the expensive designer boutique Brandon decided he was going to raid on my behalf that this particular gown was totally going to be my ally.

I may not have known a thing about fashion a few months ago when I'd been the worst-dressed girl in the entire eleventh grade at Tribeca Alternative High School.

But I've always been a fast learner.

"Brandon," I said to him. The long hallway— which was glass on one side so you could see the ocean and dunes (when it wasn't so dark out)— was empty except for us two (and the paparazzi, of course. But I'm fairly certain the private security guards Brandon had hired, who were patrolling outside of the house, had flushed out any photographers). I closed the guest room door behind me so there was no chance Nikki would overhear what I was about to say to him.

I figured it was probably useless. I'd tried reasoning with him before.

But never in Armani.

"This is ridiculous," I went on. "You're supposed to be trying to seduce Nikki,

not me. She's the one with the secret your dad tried to have her murdered for. The one you want to steal so you can kick your dad out and take over?"

Brandon just stared down at me. He's no smarter, in some ways, than Jason Klein, the king of the Walking Dead (aka the jocks) back at my high school.

Just richer, and with fewer morals.

"Which is great, but I have to get back to the city," I said to him. I was trying to speak slowly and clearly, so he would be sure to understand me. "I have the Stark Angel fashion show in a few days. You know I can't miss that. This romantic getaway over the holidays with Brandon Stark? The press is eating it up."

Though the truth was, I couldn't imagine my mother was too happy about it. Not that I'd spoken to her. I'd been letting her calls go to voice mail. I knew if I spoke to her, the hurt I'd hear in her voice— *Really, Em. Spending the week with a boy? What's the matter with you?*— would be like a stab wound to the chest.

But what was worse was that no one else besides her— and, of course, Lulu and my agent, Rebecca, who'd called me approximately a zillion times— had left me a voice mail.

No one else, meaning the single person whose feelings I was most anxious about having wounded by taking off with Brandon Stark.

Right: Christopher Maloney, the love of my life, hadn't called.

I don't know why I thought he would have, after what I'd done to him— which was lie and tell him I didn't love him anymore...that instead, I loved Brandon. It wasn't like I *deserved* a call. Or an e-mail, or a text message, or anything at all from him.

I guess I just thought he'd get in *some* kind of contact...even if it was only to send me a letter of bitter recrimination or something. Sure, I wouldn't have enjoyed being on the receiving end of a *Dear Em: Thanks for ruining my life* e-mail. I mean, Christopher didn't know Brandon had forced me to say what I had.

But even a Dear Em letter would have been better than this cold stone silence....

But no. Nothing.

Better not to think about that now.

Or ever.

"But eventually," I forced myself to go on to Brandon, "the people I'm close to are going to start getting suspicious. They know, Brandon, that you and I aren't...well, what you're trying to make them think we are."

I was lying, of course. The people in my life had no idea that I wasn't in love with Brandon, and that this whole thing was a fake. They didn't know. Hadn't I been the one going around basically hooking up with every cute guy I'd come into contact with ever since I'd gotten my brain slipped into this hot new bod? How was anyone supposed to have known which of those guys I actually cared about and which of those guys I didn't? Right: I had made the mess I was in right now.

And I was the one who needed to get myself out of it.

Which I was actually trying to do at the moment. Although it may not have looked like it.

“I’ve got to get back to the city,” I said to Brandon again, stalling for time. “Just let me—”

Brandon reached up to lay a finger over my lips. And left it there.

“Shhh,” he said.

Uh-oh. His reboot was apparently completed. His pupils stopped looking like twin spinning beach balls of death. He’d taken a step forward.

Now he was standing just inches away from me, looking down at me with an expression I couldn’t quite read.

But, like a lot of things about him lately, it scared me a little.

“Everything’s going to be all right,” he said in what I suppose he thought was a soothing voice.

Except I was about as soothed as a Dalmatian puppy at Cruella de Vil’s house.

“I know what I’m doing,” he went on.

“Uh,” I said from behind his finger. “Actually, I don’t think you do. Because Nikki’s not going to tell you anything if you don’t start paying less attention to me and more attention to—”

Then he removed his finger and started to lean his head down to place his lips where, a second before, his finger had been.

Ugh, no. Seriously? Again?

I had goose bumps, and not because I was in a sleeveless dress.

Look, I couldn’t blame Brandon. I’d been giving him mixed messages for months. And straight up using him, basically. That’s the kind of girl I’d turned into since I’d become Nikki. It wasn’t nice to admit, but it was the truth.

But things were different now. I finally had my head— pun intended— on straight.

Nevertheless, I knew what I had to do. What I’d been having to do all week.

It’s what models have to do all the time: pretend like we’re actually comfortable in what we’re wearing, or enjoying what we’re eating, or aren’t completely freezing standing there in the ocean, waves crashing over us.

It’s not the hardest thing in the world. I’ve actually gotten pretty good at it.

And in this particular case, that was a really good thing.

Because prisoners are treated better when they get along with their jailors.

And there’s more of a chance their jailor might slip up and let down his guard if he thinks his prisoner might actually like him a little.

And that would allow the prisoner to escape.

The problem is, I can't escape until I get what I need. Which happens to be the same thing Brandon needs: the piece of information that got me into this mess in the first place.

Which means no matter how bitchy Nikki is to me, I have to put up with her until she spills her guts.

So no matter how much Brandon grosses me out, I have to put up with him.

Nobody said it was easy being a prisoner.

So I did what I had to do: I let Brandon kiss me.

Fortunately, just as I saw Brandon's lips looming closer and closer to mine, I heard a nearby door thrown open.

It wasn't plan C.

But it was enough.

I hastily pulled my head back, relieved I had an excuse to, since even Brandon would have to admit he couldn't afford to let Nikki see him making out with me.

Footsteps— sturdy ones, not the tippity-tap of fringed wedges— sounded on the polished marble floor, and I turned to see Nikki's older brother, Steven, coming toward us.

"Hey," he said, nodding to us both at once.

"Hello," Brandon said, his response almost comical in its lack of enthusiasm. His attitude toward Steven this past week had been cool at best. While he had to pretend to be at least somewhat enthusiastic about seeing Nikki every time she came stomping into the room, he didn't have to pretend to be enthusiastic about seeing her brother.

"So," Steven said as he walked slowly by us. "What's up?"

"Dinner's being served downstairs in the dining room," Brandon said coolly. His tone clearly suggested, *So why don't you get down there and leave us alone?*

"Yeah?" Steven didn't look like he was in any kind of hurry. And why not? Steven, like his sister, couldn't leave the house for fear he, too, might be photographed and tracked down by Robert Stark, who wasn't supposed to know where Steven or his mother was...or he might have them eliminated as well, the way he'd tried to do to Nikki.

"And what culinary delight are you going to stun us with tonight, Brandon?" Steven asked.

The funny part was, Brandon was too dumb to tell that Steven was totally being sarcastic. I had to hide my smile. Steven didn't care what was for dinner. He hated Brandon as much as I did. He'd never said so...

...but I could totally tell.

"She-crab soup," Brandon said, "and some kind of crab salad— peekytoe, I think — along with a foie gras or something."

As Brandon was speaking, Steven started heading for the floating staircase to the first floor. Because he usually left the room while Brandon was talking. That's how much he hated Brandon.

In my mind, I was screaming, *Don't go, Steven! Don't leave me alone with him!*

But of course I couldn't say anything like that. I had to be polite. On the surface.

"And then," Brandon went on, in a bored tone, "filet mignon. There's a chocolate soufflé for dessert."

"Sounds great," Steven said over his shoulder. He was wearing some of the clothes Brandon had bought for him, a pair of black jeans and a dark gray cashmere sweater, the sleeves pushed up to the elbows. All of us— with the exception of Nikki and her mom, who'd had time to throw a few things into some bags before they'd left Dr. Fong's house— had arrived at Brandon's with nothing but the clothes on our backs (and our dogs...those of us who owned dogs), trying to escape from Robert Stark.

Brandon had been more than generous about making sure Steven and his mom had the things they might need, since they couldn't use their credit cards for fear Stark Enterprises might be able to trace them.

But I could sense that Steven seemed annoyed at being beholden to the son of a man who'd caused his family so much heartache. He never actually *said* anything that was outright rude to Brandon.

But he did *do* things that someone who was a little more self-aware than Brandon might have found rude. Such as walk out of the room while Brandon was still speaking.

"Filet mignon again. Great," Steven tossed over his shoulder as he headed down the stairs. "Oh, hey, Brandon," he added casually. "You know your Lamborghini is on fire, right?"

Brandon's hand went to the wire-suspended steel banister and froze.

"What?"

"Your new Lamborghini," Steven said. "I noticed it just now when I looked out across the driveway. It's in flames."

Yes. *Finally*. Plan C in action.

Brandon glanced out the bank of windows that looked over the front of the house, seeming a little scornful, like, *Yeah, right. My car is on fire.*

A second later his demeanor changed entirely. He let out a curse word that singed my ears.

"My car," he cried. "It's on fire!"

"That's what I said." Steven shook his head, looking up at me from the bottom of the stairs, as if to say, *What a loser*. "Isn't that what I just said?"

Brandon let out another curse and, grabbing his hair with both hands, tore past me, nearly shoving me down the stairs in his haste to get by, and then barreling by

Steven.

“Call 9-1-1!” he screamed.

Three

NIKKI CHOSE THAT EXACT MOMENT TO come out of her room.

“What’s wrong with Brandon?” she asked as she click-clacked down the hall toward me.

“His car is on fire,” Steven said with a shrug.

“What?” Nikki’s voice rose to a high-pitched shriek. “Not the new Lamborghini!”

I had to flatten myself against the wall in order not to get knocked down as she hurried off after Brandon, her heels making a huge racket on the shiny marble floor.

“Brandon,” she cried, racing after him. “Wait! I’m coming!”

I wanted to remind her not to go outside or the paparazzi might get a shot of her, but it was too late. She was already gone.

Cosabella, who’d followed me from my room, rushed down the stairs after Nikki, her claws skittering on the slick floor. She gave a few excited barks and then, when Nikki slammed the front door in her face, gave herself a good shake and came trotting back into the living room, looking proud of herself for a job well done.

“So.” Steven folded his arms and stared up at me as I made my way down the long staircase. It was a little treacherous to navigate in high heels and a skintight Armani evening gown, I found. “You set the guy’s car on fire?”

This caused me to freeze in my tracks.

“Me?” I arranged my face into a suitably shocked expression. “What makes you think it was me, and not one of the paps, trying to lure him outside so they could get a photo op?”

“Because I found your fuse,” he said, holding up what used to be a wooden mixed-bead necklace Brandon had given me...

...at least until I’d rolled it in a mixture that included hot water, sugar, and another substance and let it dry overnight.

“You’re a liar,” I said when I reached the bottom of the stairs. I plucked the singed necklace from his hand. “You said you saw the car burning from the windows.”

“Actually,” Steven said, “I did. And I went out to investigate. That was a little while ago. I found it so interesting, I thought I’d let it keep going, to see what would happen. Where did *you* of all people learn to make a slow-burning fuse?”

“YouTube,” I said. I dropped the charred necklace into the neck of a Greek amphora that was sitting at the bottom of the stairs. “And I resent the implication that a girl wouldn’t necessarily know her way around explosives. I go to an alternative high school, you know.”

“Of course.” Steven nodded. “Stupid of me. But let me ask you a question,” he said as he followed me into the dining room, where I’d gone to sit down at the massive, already set table. “Why would you want to blow up Brandon Stark’s new

car?”

Because he's holding us prisoner here. And Christopher doesn't love me anymore.

“It's not going to blow up,” I said. “I just made a decorative design on the hood with lighter fluid. And there are plenty of fire extinguishers out there. I checked. If Brandon has any sense, he'll get the fire out before it does any permanent damage to anything but the paint job.”

And I hadn't timed the fire right. It was supposed to have gone up *before* he got a chance to kiss me.

“You didn't need to destroy his car,” Steven said, joining me at the table. “The guy is a tool, but that's going a little far, don't you think?”

“No,” I said shortly. Cosabella curled up at my feet beneath the table.

“Wow.” Steven stared at me. “You really hate him.”

I pictured Christopher's face growing smaller and smaller in the distance as the limo Brandon had forced me into snaked its way down the road.

You have, my voice mail's robotic voice said in my head, over and over, *no new messages*.

Yeah. I guess I did hate Brandon.

“I told you,” I said. “I was only trying to mess up the paint job a little.”

Steven shook his head. “I'm not falling for it, Em.”

Of course he wasn't. Nikki's brother is a trained naval officer. He isn't stupid.

But I widened my eyes and went for the innocent act anyway. Because of what Brandon said would happen if I didn't.

“I don't know what you mean,” I said.

“Convincing,” Steven said. “But spill now while we have five minutes alone together for once. You're not in love with Brandon Stark. What's going on, Em? Why are you pretending to be in love with Brandon on the one hand, then setting his car on fire behind his back?”

Whatever she knows about Stark Quark, if it's worth killing Nikki Howard for—and then giving her a brain transplant to keep her image alive—it's worth knowing. Believe me. And I want in, Brandon had whispered to me that cold gray morning back in New York, just a week ago.

Why should I help you? I'd demanded.

Because, he'd said. *If you don't, I'll tell my dad where the real Nikki Howard is. And*, he'd added, about Christopher, *no more of that other guy, the one in the leather jacket, who seems so into you. Just me. You're mine now. Understand?*

I'd looked up at him then like he was crazy.

But now I know better. Brandon Stark isn't crazy. Dumb, maybe. Desperate to leave his mark on the planet, the way his father has, but with no real idea about how to

go about doing that.

But not crazy.

And if you tell them that I'm making you do it, I'll tell my father about the girl.

Would he? Would Brandon tell?

He certainly didn't care about Nikki— or about Steven or Mrs. Howard. Sure, he was willing to house— and clothe— them, since they had nowhere else to go, thanks to his dad's company essentially stalking them.

But he was only doing this because of what he thought he was going to get out of it: me (only not the real me. The me he thought I was, this made-up girl whose name he didn't even really know, who looked like Nikki Howard).

Oh, and whatever it was Nikki knew that he thought was going to make him so much money.

"Em." Steven was staring at me, his face— so much like the one I saw reflected in the mirror every morning when I put on my makeup, only masculine— tight with anxiety. "Whatever he's threatened you with, I swear to you, I can make it better. You just have to tell me what's going on."

I wanted to believe him. I really did. I'd never had a big brother before, but I was starting to really love Nikki's. He was so comforting, with his wide shoulders and steady gaze. I almost believed that he could make it all better.

But of course he couldn't. No one could.

And if you tell them that I'm making you do it, I'll tell my father about the girl.

Except Brandon wasn't going to tell his father a thing about Nikki. He couldn't. He needed her too much. She held the key to everything.

But Christopher. He'd tell his father about Christopher.

"Oh, there you are," Nikki's mother called as she came down the floating staircase, holding carefully to the handrail as both her poodles, Cosabella's siblings, skittered down the steps in front of her. "Is everything all right? What was all that ruckus I heard before?"

Talk about saved by the bell...a real Southern belle, as a matter of fact: Nikki and Steven's mom had the drawl and the gently fading beauty of one. You could see where both Nikki and Steven got their good looks. Mrs. Howard was still what my dad would call a knockout.

But before anyone could say anything else, the chef's assistant came out of the kitchen, holding a silver tray.

"She-crab soup," he said, trying to ignore the obnoxiously dancing poodles at his feet, all hoping they might be able to trip him and that he might spill some of what he was carrying. He seemed more disconcerted by the fact that there were only three of us than by the dogs.

"Oh," he said. "Is Mr. Stark not ready for dinner yet?"

“There was a little emergency,” I said. “He’ll be back in a few minutes. I guess you could tell the chef to go ahead and serve.”

The assistant nodded, holding the tray for Steven and his mother to help themselves to the first course, then retreated back into the kitchen, his rubber clogs soundless on the black marble floor. Cosabella and Mrs. Howard’s dogs, Harry and Winston, followed after him, still eagerly hoping he might drop something.

“What kind of emergency?” Mrs. Howard asked.

“Em lit his car on fire,” Steven said.

Mrs. Howard, about to lift her shot glass of soup to her mouth, gasped instead. “Em! Why would you do such a thing?”

I shrugged. I couldn’t tell her I’d done it because Brandon was a great big lying fake who’d caused me and my boyfriend to break up forever. She, like everyone else, thought I was in love with Brandon, and that he was protecting her and her daughter from his evil father.

And, in a way, he was.

I didn’t want to worry her more than she already was. She’d left everything behind— her business, her home, her friends, her life— for her daughter.

Who actually didn’t seem all that grateful for it, if you asked me.

“Shouldn’t we call the fire department?” Mrs. Howard asked, still looking shocked.

Just as she was saying this, one of the glass side doors opened, and Brandon came in, Nikki tripping at his heels.

“I’m telling you, it was those jerks from *OK!*” Brandon said. “And I’m not standing for it. Not a second longer. I’m calling my lawyers. I’m suing for the cost of replacing my car.”

“You’re so right, Brandon.” Nikki wobbled along after him in her too-high— and several sizes too big for her— platform wedges. “It had to be them. Who else would do such a thing?”

“Is everything all right?” Mrs. Howard asked. “No one was hurt, were they? Is the fire out? Nikki, no one got a photo of you out there, did they?”

“Oh, it’s out,” Brandon said as Nikki shook her head. Brandon had his iPhone glued to his face. “And Nikki’s fine. But the paint job on my car is ruined. Ruined! Hello, Ken?” He started shouting into his cell phone. “Ken, it’s Brandon. They trashed my car. What? The Murciélago, that’s which one. Why? How the hell should I know why? To get a reaction out of me that they can plaster all over their damn magazine covers, that’s why. Why else?”

“I don’t know how any of us are supposed to be able to eat,” Nikki said with a sigh as she sat down, unfolding her white linen napkin with a snap, “after what just happened. The paparazzi have just gotten so out of control. How could they do such an awful thing to poor Brandon?”

“What makes you think it was the paparazzi?” Steven asked, not looking in my direction anymore as the chef’s assistant came into the dining room, carrying another tray. He was trying very hard not to trip over the dogs again.

“I don’t know who else it would be,” Nikki said. “Brandon’s never hurt anyone. He’s completely sweet and adorable.”

I choked a little on the sip of sparkling water I’d just swallowed. If Brandon was sweet and adorable, I was Satan’s bride.

“Maybe,” I said when I’d recovered, “it was his dad.”

“What?” Nikki looked confused. “Why would his dad send him a nice car for Christmas, then light it on fire?”

“Because,” I said, “maybe Mr. Stark knows you’re here.”

Nikki turned visibly pale.

“You think he knows?” she asked.

Yeah. I was evil. I was a car-burning, lie-telling supermodel. Whatever. I didn’t care anymore. They’d already given me a brain transplant, made me dump my boyfriend, and were going to make me parade around in a million-dollar bra on national television in a couple of days. What more could they do to me? Kill me?

Well, guess what? I was already dead.

“He could suspect,” I said. “And if he does, we don’t have much time. We need to know what it is he tried to murder you for. That way we can get the proof we need to prosecute Brandon’s dad and have him put away where he can’t try to hurt you anymore.”

Nikki’s chin slid out stubbornly.

“Like I already told my *mother*,” she said, putting an unpleasant emphasis on the word *mother*, “when she tried to bring this up the other day: Brandon’s dad did not try to have me murdered. I don’t know where you all keep coming up with this story—”

“Because we all sat in the same room with Dr. Fong,” Mrs. Howard explained patiently. “And heard him reveal that you didn’t have an embolism, Nikki—”

“But they forced him to do the surgery, anyway,” Steven interrupted. “They were going to *throw your brain away*. He saved your life by transplanting it into the body you have now. Why don’t you get that? Just tell us what you were going to blackmail Robert Stark about, and we can all go back to our old lives.”

“Oh.” Suddenly, Nikki’s eyes were bright with unshed tears. “Can we? Can we all go back to our old lives, Steven? I’m sorry, but you seem to have forgotten that that isn’t possible for some of us. Because *there’s another girl living in my old body*.”

She shot me a look that sent chills up my spine. No one— not even Whitney Robertson, back at Tribeca Alternative, who I’m pretty sure had disliked me more than any human being in the entire universe, and only because when I was on her volleyball team during PE, I’d sometimes miss the ball— had ever given me a look of such pure, unadulterated hatred.

“So I can’t go back to my old life,” Nikki said to her brother. “That girl right there is living in my apartment, using my money, taking my gigs; even *my dog* likes her better than me.” She pointed through the glass tabletop at Cosabella, who was sitting at the side of my chair, panting up at me eagerly, hoping I might slip her a piece of whatever food was about to be served (which, I have to admit, I’d been known on occasion to do).

“So excuse me,” Nikki went on, “if I’m not exactly in a rush to get out of here. I happen to like things exactly as they are, considering the alternatives. Because if you think I’m going back home to live in redneck Gasper, USA, with you and Mom, Steven, well, you can just think again. I’m never going back there. *Never.*”

“Nikki,” I said. I felt terrible about what had happened to her. I really did. Even though none of it had been my fault— hey, I definitely hadn’t chosen to be the new brain behind the Face of Stark— I felt like I owed her something.

But I had to get out of Brandon Stark’s control before I went crazy.

Or lit something else of his on fire. Like his pants, for instance.

“Maybe we could work something out.” I lowered my voice just in case Brandon, even tied up as he seemed to be in his phone call, happened to overhear me.

She narrowed her eyes at me.

“What do you mean, work something out?”

“Well,” I half whispered. “Like, I could give you the money back. The money in your bank account. I’d also offer you a cut of anything I make in the future. You know, from future jobs.”

Nikki leaned back in her chair. The chef’s assistant had set decoratively arranged plates of peekytoe salad in front of each of us, including in front of Brandon’s empty seat. Brandon was still pacing at the bottom of the stairs, on the phone with his lawyer. Every once in a while a burst of his conversation would reach us. It sounded like, “What do you mean, I need proof?” and “No, I don’t see why I should have to do that!” He was clearly lost in his own little world.

“That sounds fair, Nikki,” Mrs. Howard said, moving some of her peekytoe salad around on her plate. “You really ought to consider it.”

“I don’t have to consider anything,” Nikki said. “She’s not offering me anything I wouldn’t have if none of this had happened in the first place. She’s offering me less, actually, than I would have had.”

“But you ruined your career,” Steven pointed out, his voice raised a little in frustration, “by trying to blackmail your boss. Which he should have fired you for. But instead, he tried to have you killed. Either way, Emerson’s the one who would be doing all the work.”

Nikki stared at him like he was stupid.

“You think modeling is work?” she demanded. “Getting paid to stand around in five-thousand-dollar dresses while people airbrush makeup onto you and compliment