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opening extract from

Airhead: Being Nikki

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Daily Telegraph

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One

I'm cold.

I'm freezing, actually.

The waves are crashing against the backs of my legs, and the water, which this afternoon had been a warm turquoise, has turned an icy black. The rocks to which I'm clinging are cutting into my fingertips and the bottoms of my feet. They're slippery as a glacier, but I can't let go or I'll fall into that frigid water – in which, no exaggeration, sharks are swarming – beneath me.

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

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

'No, no, no,' André yelled on the boat from which he was directing the shoot. 'Viv, adjust the gel on that spot over there. No, that one over *there*.'

Seriously. I should have just fallen backwards into the

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lately, anyway.

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

'We just need a few more shots, Nikki,' André called.

'You're doing great.' Someone said something, and he added, 'Can you try to stop trembling?'

'I'm not trembling,' I pointed out. 'I'm shaking. With cold.'

'What did she say?' André asked Brandon. No one could understand a word coming out of my mouth because of the dagger.

'How should I know?' Brandon said to André. 'Nikki,' he called to me. 'What did you say?'

'I said I'm *cold*,' I yelled. The waves were getting bigger, wetting the bottom of my suit now. My butt was numb. Great. I couldn't feel my butt.

Why was I doing this again? Was it for a Stark-brand perfume? Or a cellphone? I couldn't even remember any more.

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

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

'I don't know what she said,' I heard Brandon telling André.

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

I couldn't tell what was happening, because the boat was behind me. But flashes started going off. I strained my neck, looking up the side of the cliff, trying to stay in my part. I tried not to think about the fact that I was

in a way too skimpy white bikini. Instead, I pictured myself in body armour. I wasn't me, Em Watts, at all. I was Lenneth Valkyrie, recruiting souls of fallen warriors and leading them to Valhalla. I could do it. I could do *anything*.

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

I could have done with some body armour. It made no sense, really, that a trained assassin – which is what I was apparently supposed to be – would climb a cliff barefoot in a bikini, without even a pocket where she'd be able to keep a cellphone. Except possibly in her knife-holder. Maybe that's why I was holding the knife in my mouth instead of where it would make sense – *in the holder*?

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

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

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

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

'You're doing great, Nikki,' Francesco called, clicking

away. 'I can really see the grim determination on your face –'

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

Except that the knife blade was made out of plastic.

But I bet it'd still do the job just fine.

'– the sheer desperation of a girl reduced by circumstances to her most fundamental self,' Francesco went on, 'as she struggles for survival in a world where everyone and everything seems to be pitted against her –'

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

'I think she's supposed to be happy, actually,' André said, sounding concerned. 'Because she knows she's wearing Stark-brand deodorant, and that gives girls the confidence they need to get the job done.'

Oh. So this was a deodorant ad.

'Happy, Nikki,' André called. 'Be happy! We're in the islands! You should be having a good time with this!'

I knew André was right. I *should* have been having a good time with this. What did I have to be so unhappy about anyway? I had everything a girl my age could want: I had a great career as the Face of Stark Enterprises, for which I was more than well compensated. I had my own two-bedroom loft in a landmark building in downtown Manhattan, which I shared with the most adorable miniature poodle in the history of time, plus a hilarious – though I'm not sure she means to be – celebutante room-mate who routinely gets us into all the best party spots in town.

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

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

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

But if I spent every spare minute of my time studying, I could maybe graduate on time with the rest of my class. Not too shabby for a girl who had spent a month of this past semester in a coma.

So why was I so freaking depressed?

'Make her look happy,' I heard André say to Brandon, who obliged by calling out, 'Hey, Nik! This is just like that time you and I were in Mustique together last year, remember? And you were doing that shoot for British *Vogue,* and we had that private cabana? And we drank all that Goldschläger? Then we went skinny-dipping? God, we had the best time . . .'

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

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

It was just that suddenly, being eaten by sharks seemed preferable to hearing the rest of Brandon's story.

Because I'd heard a lot of similar stories over the past month – not just from Brandon, but from guys all over Manhattan – and I had a pretty good idea how it was going to turn out. For a seventeen-year-old – and one who was allegedly going out with her employer's only son – Nikki Howard had certainly had a lot of male companions.

I heard screams from the boat. But a part of me didn't even care. I hit the water backwards. It was even colder than I'd imagined it would be. All the breath was sucked from my body, and the shock was so intense, for a second I wondered if a shark had bitten me in half. I knew from a documentary Christopher and I had once watched that a shark's teeth were so sharp, their victims didn't even feel that first, initial crunch. They often weren't aware they'd been injured . . . not until they were surrounded by the warm current of their own blood.

Bone-chilling cold wasn't the only thing I experienced as I hit the water, though. I was also plunged into darkness. At least at first. Until my vision adjusted to the murky water, and I saw that the lights from the boat had lit up the ocean around me. That was when I knew I hadn't been bitten in half. There weren't any swirling clouds of blood around me. Just dark blobs I realized were nurse sharks, swimming frantically to get away from me. I guess Dom had been right – they *were* more scared of us than we were of them. I could also see my own hair, swaying like

golden seaweed around me. They'd rowed me over to the cliff so carefully in a rubber dinghy just forty-five minutes earlier to keep my hair – and the swimsuit – from getting wet.

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

If I resurfaced.

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

It was totally amazing, and for a second or two, I forgot about how cold and miserable I was, and that I couldn't feel my butt. Oh, and that I couldn't breathe and was probably drowning.

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

But I'd never actually cared about lipgloss.

The fact was, I was being forced to work for a corporation I was pretty sure was responsible for turning America into one endless, soulless strip mall.

And the guy I liked didn't know I was alive. Literally.

And if I told him I wasn't dead, Stark Enterprises, that I was pretty sure was spying on me every chance it got, was going to throw my parents in jail.

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

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

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

The next thing I knew, though, there was an enormous splash beside me. And suddenly Brandon, fully clothed, was swimming towards me, and had grabbed me, and was pulling me – gasping and choking – to the surface, and then to the boat.

I was a little angry. And also shivering uncontrollably.

OK, I guess I didn't really want to live on the bottom of the ocean.

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

I don't think.

When I looked past Brandon's taut arm muscles as he towed me back to the boat, I saw my agent's assistant peering at me worriedly from the bow.

'Oh my God, Nikki, are you OK?' Shauna cried. Cosabella, who she was clutching in her arms, was barking hysterically. Cosabella. I'd forgotten about Cosabella. How could I have been so selfish? Who'd have taken care of Cosabella? Lulu isn't responsible enough. She forgets to feed herself half the time (except for mojitos and popcorn). No way would she remember to feed a tiny dog.

Shauna had asked a good question. *Was* I OK? That was something I'd been asking myself for a while now.

Sometimes I wondered if I'd ever be OK again.

'Nikki,' I heard Francesco call out from the boat, 'thank God. It's all right. I got the shot.'

Great. Not: *Nikki, thank God.* You're *all right. But: Nikki, thank God.* It's *all right: I got the shot.*

God forbid he might not have.

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

Not until we got the shot.

Two

I was alone in my hotel room (well, alone except for Cosabella, who wouldn't stop licking the salt water from my face), attempting to defrost in my balcony's private hot tub. I had the jets on full, hoping to ease the cuts on my hands and feet caused by hanging on to the cliff-face. Being a model, I was learning, could be painful, and sometimes even life-threatening. Brandon and the rest of the people from the photo shoot had gone off for another one of their thousand-dollar sashimi dinners – expensed to Brandon's father, billionaire Robert Stark, of course – at the hotel restaurant downstairs. I'd declined joining them in favour of the hot tub, a burger from room service, and a few rounds of *Journeyquest* in front of my MacBook Air. Listening to gossip about the Olsen twins and then dancing to techno-pop, which I knew would follow, didn't seem all that appealing after what I'd been through.

Actually, it never seemed all that appealing to me . . . although Brandon had stood outside my door, begging me to reconsider, for a long time while I'd shivered.

Which was why, when Nikki's cellphone played the first few bars of Fergie's 'Barracuda', I was sure it was him calling.

It's embarrassing to have 'Barracuda' as a ringtone. But I'd never gotten around to changing it. Actually, since

I'd never gotten over my suspicion that Nikki's Stark-brand cellphone was bugged (her Stark-brand PC had had tracking software on it – why wouldn't Stark be listening in on her phone calls too?), I'd just never bothered to take the time to figure out how to work her phone beyond hitting the delete button. I simply avoided using it most of the time, preferring to make my personal calls on the iPhone I'd bought with one of Nikki's credit cards instead.

I checked the caller ID (I'd totally learned not to pick up unless I recognized the name. Otherwise I'd find myself at the receiving end of a long harangue about why I hadn't called in so long and how much someone with a name like Eduardo was just dying to fly to Paris with me again) and was surprised to see that it wasn't Brandon at all, but Lulu.

'What?' I said. We stopped being polite with each other the night she and Brandon had kidnapped me from the hospital after my surgery in a misguided attempt to 'rescue' me.

'Um,' Lulu said, 'there was a guy here to see you.'

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

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

And he didn't seem to have made up his mind about whether or not he liked me yet. At least if the weird looks

he kept throwing me in first period Public Speaking were any indication.

Then again, lately he was always throwing McKayla Donofrio weird looks in class all the time too, so this might have meant nothing.

'This one was different,' Lulu said.

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

'No kidding?' I'd gotten a bit pruny from having been in the water so long. Plus my hands were wet, so I almost dropped the cellphone. 'What did he want?'

'Duh. To talk to you.'

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

Lulu was chewing gum. Loudly. In my ear. 'He just said you'd know. And that it was important and that he needed to see you and that he'd be back. He didn't leave his name.'

My shoulders slumped with disappointment. It wasn't Christopher. I mean, Christopher would have left his name. He was like that.

Which meant it could only have been another one of *them*.

Seriously, you'd think they'd give up. Just how long were these scam artists going to keep at it? Really, announce on the news that a wealthy celebrity had amnesia and you wouldn't believe what kind of scum crawled out of the

bowels of the F-train tunnel, claiming to be a close friend, or even a relation. It was unbelievable how many first cousins Nikki Howard apparently had.

'He said you'd know what it was about,' Lulu informed me.

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

'I don't know,' Lulu said, 'but Karl showed me what the guy looked like on the security camera. And he wasn't like all the other ones. This one was young. And kinda hot. And he didn't have any visible neck tattoos.'

My heart skipped a beat. And not because I'd been in the hot tub longer than the twenty minutes recommended on the sign posted beside the timer on the balcony wall, either.

'Young?' I didn't want to get my hopes up. I mean, they'd already been dashed so many times before when Christopher had glanced my way in Public Speaking, only to turn out to be looking at the clock, or some homeless guy out the window, or McKayla Donofrio. 'Wait, Lulu . . . was this guy blond?'

There was a pause as Lulu appeared to be trying to remember. 'Yeah. Blond-ish, anyway.'

Good enough. 'Was he tall?' I asked.

'Uh-huh,' Lulu said.

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

But I had had major surgery a couple months ago, so

you never know. Beside me, Cosabella was licking my cheek eagerly where some of the water from the hot tub had splashed on to my face.

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

Also, I did kind of want to see what happened in *Realms*, the newest version of *Journeyquest*. The only problem was, in an exclusive deal with the game's designer, you could only get *Realms* if you bought Stark Quark, the new PC Stark Enterprises was unveiling for the holidays. *Journeyquest* fans hadn't been *too* mad about that. Much. 'Like, not *built*-built, but . . . fit?'

'It was hard to tell on the security camera,' Lulu said. 'But I wouldn't kick him out of the loft, let's put it that way.'

'Oh my God.' I snatched a towel off the balcony railing. My heart was racing like I'd just gotten off the treadmill (which was something I had to do regularly now, in order to stay in shape. But it was OK, because Nikki's body enjoyed working out, unlike my old one, which despised it). I couldn't believe it. After all this time – weeks now, I'd been waiting – Christopher was finally coming around.

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

'Lulu. *Lulu*. That was Christopher! It has to be!'