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Opening extract from

Airhead: Runaway

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Published by

Macmillan Children's Books

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One

So according to the tabloids, I'm on a secret love getaway (not so secret any more 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 by 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 room-mate, 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 blonde 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 woman'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 son of one of the richest – and best looking – 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 theatre 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 coloured maxidress, a leather motorcycle jacket, fringed wedges, and an enormous jewelled ‘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.’

OK, I was exaggerating. But only a little. Actually, if she'd just worn make-up that suited her new skin tone, and quit straightening her hair until it didn't have a hint of body left in it, and put on some clothes that weren't my cast-offs 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 per cent 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 towards 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 hadn't done a very good job of sweet-talking her out of it . . . mainly because he'd 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 colour 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 colour 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 like Strawberry Shortcake while playing croquet with his miniature pony collection, I totally wouldn't be surprised any more.

'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 per cent 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.