

Before You Go

By Ella James



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Margo Ford wrapped her arms around her waist and glanced down at her ruby hippo watch. Six-thirty six, San Juan time. Which made Cindy forty-seven minutes late.

She sighed—just a teenie tiny puff of air—and imagined the disapproving face of Mrs. Lavonia Molliweather, etiquette instructor at the Kerrigan School for Young Ladies. *Neither a huff nor a sigh apply...for a lady who wants to look her best.* Of course, at this moment she was light years from her best, and any second now, things were going to get worse. If she didn't find her six-piece Louis Vuitton trunk set soon—very soon, like in the next few seconds—Margo was going to combust.

She rubbed her pounding head, feeling all kinds of sorry for herself. She'd evacuated her best friend's summer house to hunker down with her newly minted guardian on some drab deserted island, and the woman couldn't even bother to pick her up on time.

Especially pathetic when you considered the circumstances of her visit. Margo glanced around the airport lobby, but no one seemed to be paying her any attention. She sighed and tried to shake away the heebie-jeebies.

It wasn't hard. The worst thing about this whole misadventure, and she *did* mean worst, was that her bags were MIA. If she couldn't find them, she'd be trapped on a dreary island in bad clothes, and that was something Margo couldn't bear.

She whirled toward the ticket counter, ready to make a scene, and there they were: her bags—stacked neatly on a metal cart, a beautiful burgundy buffet of Vuitton. Margo charged through the crowded terminal, Gucci sandals slapping the tile floor, teal Lanvin dress bouncing around her thighs, fingers outstretched. If she had her bags, she'd be okay. If Cindy didn't show, she could sleep here, inside a ladies' longue. She could run away, go back to Tahoe. She envisioned herself disguised as a foreigner. Maybe Japanese, with short, straight black hair—and a flowing trench by Marc Jacobs.

She could do anything, as long as she had her bags.

So when the cart started rolling...

She froze, her well-glossed lips stretched into a most unladylike grimace, while she tried to recall everything she knew about flying in a public plane. She'd been in them a few times, when her father's campaign plane had trouble, but this was her first time flying coach. Maybe coach passengers were supposed to do something special when they claimed their luggage?

And now hers was being pushed away by some kind of...handyman?

She couldn't see his face, just a grubby pair of jeans and a muddy white t-shirt. But she was on him, elbowing her way through the crowd, her long dark brown hair bouncing on her back. He hunched over the cart, his wide shoulders parting the swarm of travelers. Then, just like a ghost—or a criminal—he disappeared.

Seriously.

What the F?

She stood on her tiptoes, then scanned from left to—*There!* She'd found him, wheeling her cart into a narrow hall.

Margo trotted after him. She didn't want to make a scene, but she didn't have a choice. She cupped her hands around her mouth. "Hey, you, STOP!"

The luggage thief didn't even pause.

She lengthened her strides as he angled the cart sideways and shoved it through a door marked PRIVATE. She plowed through a second later, jogging down a flight of cement stairs that led to a

tarmac.

A quick glance across two lines of Leers, Gulfstreams, and Bombariders, and she had him. He was shoving her bags into a tiny plane, obviously rushing to escape.

“Stop that!”

It crossed her mind, as she flung herself into the dusky, fog-swathed lot, that maybe she shouldn't chase a luggage thief. She was, after all, at the center of some kidnapping plot, so chasing this guy could be even more dangerous than if he was just a thief.

But her *life* was in those bags. Her hot pink iPad, the black string bikini that was yin to her best friend Elizabeth's white yang, her dog-eared copy of *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire*. Most of all, her favorite framed picture of her father, the one where he wore the pinstriped Caraceni suit she'd chosen for his first-ever Congressional victory. That picture meant everything to her. She had to get it back.

“Stop!”

His hands froze on her largest duffel and Margo lunged forward, determined to rip it from his grasp. Then he turned, and she stopped dead in her tracks.

Holy moly, that thief was *hot*. Model hot. Maybe Ralph Lauren...or *hotter*.

Dump all her pre-sleep fantasies into a bowl of real-guy mix and toss in a whole bunch of Adonis, then bake it in the dimensions of Michelangelo's *David*, and you still wouldn't have this guy. His perfection was in every line of his face, in his beautiful suntanned skin, in his rich and shiny mess of dark brown hair.

There was something about his mouth—an almost shocking baby-doll lusciousness that made him look sinful, made her want to press her finger to his lips. But the real wow factor was his eyes: pale blue-gray and smart as hell, topped with thick dark brows that lent him a young Marlon Brando vibe.

As her gaze lapped his long, lean form—lineman's shoulders straining through thin white cotton, powerful arms and strong-veined hands, narrow hips in slouching denim—she wobbled closer, finger pointing; she struggled to remember why.

He held her gaze, those blue eyes burning. Then he slung her duffel bag into the plane.

“Those are mine,” she practically gasped. *Embarrassing*.

“And you are?”

“I'm...” *Margo Ford, would you like to kidnap me?* She crossed her arms. “I'm the person whose initials are on those tags.”

“And who is that?”

“Someone who wants her bags back.”

“Well how do I know they're your bags if you won't tell me your name?” His mouth tugged up on one side, and he rested a big hand on the cart.

“Why would I tell a stranger my name?”

“Well, I guess you've got me there.” He broke into a grin, swaggered forward and clasped her hand. For one wild moment, Margo wondered if he was real.

Her eyes tugged his, their gazes linked like magnets—north and south. She felt a snap of startling contentedness, and when he smiled again, it was like the sun. “I'm Logan Greer, your pilot. It's nice to meet you, Margo Zhu.”

Thunderstruck. That would be the word, she thought. Her cells vibrated. The ground shook. Then her skin pulled taut over her bones, and Margo realized: it was thundering. A fine mist drifted down from the low-slung purple clouds, polishing her cheeks and bare shoulders to a gentle sheen. She smiled at Logan—*Logan*—and murmured, “Margo Ford.”

He straightened—six-foot-two, she guessed—and looked over his shoulder as he slung the last two bags into the plane. “I thought your last name was Zhu.”

His words were slow, Southern. They made it hard for her to think. “My mom is Cindy Zhu. My dad is—” She gritted her molars. “He was Raymond Ford. The senator.”

Pain pounded through her, old, familiar. Logan’s face mirrored it. “I was sorry to hear about that.”

“Thank you.”

His thick brows pinched, those blue eyes seeing down to her leukocytes. His gaze was so honest she felt unnerved. Then he was smiling, the intensity lost in a flash of Crest-white teeth. “You ready?” His arms folded.

“For what?”

“To go.” He was doing it again. That *look*.

“Um, I guess so.” She glanced down the row of planes. “Which is mine?”

He patted the one that held her luggage. “*Miss Louise.*”

She eyed the ragged plane, and then his face. He looked even more handsome when he smiled. Like a sexy bandit, with his dirt-smudged cheek and messy hair. She smiled back. “This is a joke. You’re not really a pilot.” She looked at his muddy boots. “Of course you’re not.”

“I’m not?” He was grinning.

“I don’t think so.”

One dark eyebrow arched. “Why not?”

“You’re too...” *Gorgeous* was what came to mind, but what she said was, “young.”

He crossed his arms—thick arms. “Been flying for eight years.”

“No way.” She leaned closer. He was confident for sure, and he seemed capable, but he didn’t look much older than she was. “This isn’t my plane, and you’re not my pilot. I’m supposed to be flying to Isis with my— with Cindy.”

His pretty mouth formed an “o.” “You are?”

“Yes.” Her heart sank. “Is something wrong?”

“She’s okay and all... But she had to go to Switzerland.”

Margo felt shocked, then hurt. Cindy had left her here? To go to Isis all alone?

“For how long?”

“She’s supposed to be gone most of the summer, but she’s coming back July Fourth. There’s this party at the island’s hotel...”

Whatever he said next, she didn’t hear it. The tip-tapping of the misting rain swelled to a dull roar. Or maybe that was the blood inside her head. She looked down at her feet, the suede gladiator sandals she’s bought the week before. She smoothed her favorite dress, wrinkled now, from being crammed into horrible, stifling coach. Out of nowhere, she thought about the last summer. That balmy night she and her father had sat on the back porch in Napa, listening to the crickets sing.

“You need to meet your mother,” he’d said.

And that’s what she’d thought, from the day he’d flat-lined, lost to cancer. She needed to meet her mother. She had felt certain, when the plane came for her—Cindy Zhu’s plane, taking her away from

her old life, to the boarding school Cindy had chosen—that her mother would be on it. But no. They’d met in Atlanta, to—what else?—sign papers. Their time together had lasted less than ten minutes, and while it had made her an official heiress, it had left her with a lonely, drifting feeling.

She’d heard nothing from her— from *Cindy* until back in May, when Raul, head of Cindy’s security, had phoned to let her know, in his crisp, Moroccan accent, that there was a plot to kidnap her, and that she’d be spending the second half of the summer on her mother’s island.

And then Cindy’s letter:

I hope your time spent with the Timberdime family is pleasant. Enclosed, your tickets from Reno-Tahoe to San Juan. A private plane will take you from that airport to my Isle of Isis. The observatory staff is preparing for you.

— CZ

Cold. Impersonal. Now Margo understood why.

Her mother hadn’t urged Margo to come to her summer residence so they could get to know each other. She’d never even planned on being there. Margo would be alone on the island. Babysat by a bunch of astronomers, geeks slaving away at a dreary astronomical observatory. She’d be out of harm’s way, and out of her mother’s, too.

She must have looked as unhappy as she felt, because Logan clasped her hand and tugged her under the hangar. His fingers curled around hers, hot and hard. “I can get you there. A small plane’s not so bad if you’ve got a decent pilot.”

She stared into his blue eyes, so...kind. “And you’re decent?”

“Not *decent*.” He winked. “I’m good.”

His fingers slid from hers, touching down on the small of her back as they turned toward the plane. *Miss Louise*. She was beige with a blue stripe down her middle. “You ever been in a Cessna 152?”

Margo shook her head.

“Climb inside. I’ll show you around.”

Logan opened a small, square door and Margo scooted to her seat. Her eyes fell on the confusing bevy of controls and her stomach clenched. Was she really doing this? Flying in this tiny plane with this random guy to an island filled with strangers?

I have to. Cindy was the only family she had left. Her father’s people had scattered after his funeral; no one wanted to be left with a 5’2 piece of baggage.

While she was hurting from that particular betrayal, Logan climbed in, filling the cabin with his wide shoulders. She had the unnerving feeling that he was assessing her in some way. It was confirmed when he asked, “Don’t like to fly?”

“Am I that obvious?”

He pulled a towel from under his seat and passed it to her. “You look a little pale.”

She wiped her cheeks and neck. “Yeah. I’m...tired. And you’re right,” she ’fessed. “I’m not a fan of planes. Especially small ones.”

She held out the towel, and he stashed it in the little box between their seats. “Why don’t you buckle in?” he asked as he put on a headset. “Once we get going, I’ll show you how things work. Makes it easier.”

Margo fumbled with her seatbelt, her hands shaking so badly she couldn’t get it snapped. Too soon the plane was rumbling, and they were rolling out of the hangar. She got her belt clicked just as

Miss Louise lumbered forward, wheels bouncing over the narrow airstrip.

As she looked out the window at the dim, rain-darkened buildings, the gloomy landscape seemed to mock her. Tears blurred the runway. Her chest hurt, like she'd swallowed something sharp.

"Hey." Logan's voice was gentle, the kiss of air you used to soothe a horse. "It's gonna be okay."

Margo nodded, shutting her eyes until she felt the last bump of the runway, and smooth air stretched out under them. Gravity tugged her, and the waterworks started up again.

She was looking at her manicured nails when he spoke. "We're about to pop over the clouds. You'll be able to see the moon. Just hang on."

Hang on. Isn't that all she'd been doing for the last year now? Hanging on? Margo swallowed hard, and heard herself say, "I think I want to go back. To the airport."

She put a cold hand to her cheek, so he wouldn't see her weird expression when she cried. He couldn't see—but he could hear her.

"What's the matter?"

He was pressing levers, twisting knobs. The dashboard lights twinkled through her fingers, which were covering her face. "I don't think I can do this."

"What?"

"Go to Isis." She pulled her hand off her face and fiddled with her seatbelt, too embarrassed to look at him. She unclasped her buckle, an empty gesture.

"Why not?"

At that moment, the plane's nose poked through the wall of clouds, and there was the moon, a glowing ball in an indigo sky.

"We're just coasting now. You've got all my ears."

All his ears... Who *was* this guy? Margo sneaked a glance at him, surprised by how ordinary he looked. Just a guy—okay, a hot guy—wearing dirty jeans and a dirty shirt. Why was he being so nice to her?

She smoothed the wrinkled fabric of her dress over her thighs. When she glanced at him, his eyes held hers.

"It's nothing really. I just...don't know my— Cindy terribly well." Deep breath. Some way to spin it? "We were kind of...distant when my dad died."

He nodded lightly, like she was talking about something important and he was following.

"I wanted to spend some time with her this summer. Get to know her. But now she's not even here, and I wish I could just go back to Tahoe, but I can't because my best friend's family is going to Europe and I have nowhere else to go. My dad was his family's black sheep, and they don't keep in touch. Coming here—coming to an observatory—seems ridiculous. I mean, why would I? I don't even get why this is Cindy's summer home. Why an observatory when she has so many other houses?" Deep breath. She was going to explain the kidnapping plot, but decided against.

Logan nodded. No surprise, no pity.

"Maybe I should just...I don't know. I could stay for a little while. Until I find out at least something—about Cindy. I don't know." She sighed again, and belatedly remembered: *Neither a huff nor a sigh apply, for a lady who wants to be polite.*

She glanced at Logan, worried she'd turned him off. Since she'd started at Kerrigan, Margo hadn't exactly been a people-magnet—and she wondered if maybe the reason was...this. Without her dad, she had this... Well, she didn't know what it was exactly, but it felt like a rubber band twisting in her chest. No matter how hard she tried—to have fun, to move on—she couldn't seem to make it stop pinching. So she was always kind of glum. And glum was the last thing guys wanted.

She held her breath as the silence spun out. She trained her ears on the rumbling motor sound, in case he didn't speak. In case it was going to be silence from here on out.

She jumped when he spoke: “Do you ride? Horses?”

That was random. Random but seriously welcome. Margo nodded, maybe a little bit too hard.

“We’ve got stables on Isis. I work there in the day. Maybe I could show you around?”

A soothing warmth spread through her chest. If she had a friend... “That might work out.” She glanced at him, suddenly shy. “You like to ride?”

“Grew up on a farm.”

“Really?” She’d never met a real farmer, or the son of one. Not unless you counted viticulturists.

“My dad’s a cropduster.” His dark brows raised. “You know, chemicals on crops?”

She knew. In California that was considered terribly unhealthy. But she nodded like it was just fine. “And you’re a pilot for the island?”

“You could say that.”

She found her mouth tugging up into a smile. “If you didn’t say that, what else could you say?”

“Hmmm...” His eyebrows wiggled, and he grinned around the headset microphone. “I guess you could say I’m kind of a modern-day Jedi.”

She laughed. Actually laughed in that awful little plane. “Obi-Wan Kenobi is pretty much my all-time hero. And,” she grinned proudly, “I had a horse named R2D2.”

His jaw dropped, and he lifted one thick hand to point at his chest. “*Yoda*. You believe that?”

“No. Well,” she checked, eyes rolling over his t-shirt and mud-smeared jeans, “I believe you have a horse.”

“I’m gonna take that as a compliment.”

“You should.” She beamed. “My black stallion was named Rhett.”

He laughed again, and she felt lifted by the sound. “Come over here.” He patted the wooden box between their seats. “I’ll show you how she works.”

The blue of the sky was deepening, afternoon purple to a coat of nighttime blue. The moon seemed to twinkle, full and bright. Logan smiled again, and for a moment, Margo felt impervious.

He grabbed her hand, and she burned from inside out. She got so hot she had to fidget, and her knee brushed his thigh by accident. He looked at her, long enough for it to maybe be a *look*, and nodded at the dials. He pointed to one near the middle and she followed his finger, nearly breathless with the thrill of being close to him.

“This one here’s especially for cloudy weather.” He pointed to another. “And this tells us our altitude.”

As if to demonstrate, the plane bumped. Her heart lurched, leaping forward like it could catch them, as the gauge jumped.

“It’s okay—”

They bumped again, bumpier this time. And then again. Logan worked the controls, and Margo tried to tell herself it was just turbulence. Then the engine coughed. The plane arched. Her head smacked the rear window and she yelped as something bumped the windshield. She saw a flash of white and what might have been feathers.

Okay, that was definitely feathers.

“Buckle in. I’ll get us straight.” He sounded so confident, that low voice so lazy, she almost forgot to be afraid. Then a bird slammed into the windshield and she heard a crunching sound.

Logan leaned over the controls. “C’mon now. Buckle up!”

Her legs shook as she scooted back into her seat and fumbled with her belt. The plane vibrated like a theme park ride, bouncing her feet against the floor. Margo heard a cry escape her lips. Then the shaking ebbed.

“It’s okay.” He laughed over the engine’s moan. “I was showing you a stall! So you’ll trust the plane!”

Just as she opened her mouth to say, *You scared me half to death!*, there came through the cool air an awful shriek, like an axle was caught and tugging to break free.

And then the plane was rolling. She heard a low squawk of radio transmission before the indigo sky was twirling madly. The moon spun like a marble, and Margo thought how white it was, how round.

She didn't know she was screaming until Logan yelled, "Be quiet!"

She couldn't. The plane was curving, nose tipped down, and she could feel them plunging toward the sea.

"Shut your eyes!"

Oh God.

She went limp and careless, sweet surrender, and felt the sudden thrust of his arm across her chest. Her eyes popped open, and she saw the island, small and bright and rising way too fast.

"It's okay!" He laughed. "I'm gonna be an astronaut!"

In that instant, she felt both pulled and tossed. The nose tip jerked, and they were gliding gently, the air a strong hand under them. She saw the ground, a rush of trees and light, and she felt sick.

"Just hold on!" His voice was gleeful, like a carnival deejay.

She clung to the door and to her seat, but it just wasn't enough. She needed human strength—the knowledge that she wasn't all alone. Her shaking hand grabbed Logan's knee. She clutched him as the ground arched up, the wheels thrust down, the runway bumped, the trees sprung up, and they were landing—safe and fine—just as the last of the sun's rays slid into the sea.

He taxied them to a tall, wide hangar, where they shuttered to a stop.

She realized she was still gripping Logan. He was laughing.

Margo sat there, unable to move or breathe or think. Then, without forethought, she slapped his cheek.

Margo peeled her linen dress off her shivering body and wondered how a day that began in sunny, tranquil Tahoe had ended so unfortunately. She had mud between her toes and blood dripping down her knee; in her panicked jog through the pine grove beside the hangar, she'd slipped. She'd also stepped through spider webs and stumbled over roots. The forest had slanted up as she'd run, and she was now stumbling her way up a full-blown hill.

Through the gusting rain, she could see the observatory dome, and beside it, a massive stucco house. They perched on the hilltop, glittering like an oasis she might never reach. Another few strides, and she had to stop and catch her breath. She glanced back down the hill, but the pine grove hid the hangar—and Logan.

Logan.

The poor guy had been nothing but nice, and she'd slapped him. Slapped him and run away like a lunatic. What was *wrong* with her?

A peal of thunder bruised her eardrums, and she skittered up the last of the knoll, splashing onto a big pond of a lawn. The rain fell harder, a thousand tiny fists pelting her shoulders and back, and she dashed toward the house. She didn't have a plan, but she knew she had to get inside. If she could find a nook, ring out her hair, maybe she could think of what to do.

She streaked through an orange garden and past a swimming pool, tiny waves gleaming like shards of glass. When she reached the big house, she lunged for the double doors and ducked into a sleek, wood-polished alcove. The yellow walls were dressed with slabs of cherry blond wood, oil landscapes, and long scrolls of Chinese calligraphy. Two high-backed mahogany chairs sported colorful woven pillows, while a fat-bellied Buddha perched at the bottom of a winding staircase.

Sharp footsteps echoed down the hall, and before Margo could find a place to hide, an aproned maid appeared, clapping her hands. "Hola! Hola!"

She looked upstairs and called, "Jana, Jana! Come, come, come!" And assuming, as she must have, that Margo didn't understand Spanish, the woman added, "The girl is here! She is very, very beautiful!"

Torn between her unhappiness at being referred to as "the girl," and glee at being called beautiful by the busty woman who was so beautiful herself, Margo couldn't think of anything to say. She was saved from having to say anything when a petite woman with spiky red-blond hair rushed down the curved stairs.

Her blue eyes twinkled in the creamy yellow globe lights and her red mouth smiled, showing large white teeth. She wore glove-tight black jeans and a green tank top, with silver disc earrings and a tiny diamond nose ring. She seemed to ooze sophistication, right until the moment she flung her arms around Margo's shoulders.

The embrace was crushing, the woman's squeal exuberant. While Margo fought the urge to pull away, her assailant took the exchange up a notch, kissing the air beside her cheek with a hearty "Mmm-wah!"

"MAR-GOOOO! So wonderful to meet you! I am Jana, observatory manager!" She thrust Margo back and grinned broadly. "You will have good times here! I take care of you!"

Her accent was mostly German, but it twisted with a hefty Spanish curl.

"You got here? You tired? You hungry?" Jana clamped one hand on Margo's shoulder and took a small step back, leaving in her body's wake a sharp tang of perfume. "You tired and hungry! We get a towel, then go to the kitchen! Someone will bring your bag."

No way, Jose. Any second now, Logan would be coming up—Logan, who she'd *slapped*—and

she needed to be long gone by then. She dug in her heels as Jana tried to pull her up the staircase.

“No thank you. I’m tired.” She spoke more loudly than was normal, feeling that Jana wouldn’t understand unless she screamed. “I can eat something later. Right now, I’d like to go to my room.”

“Oh, *si*! You want to see the room!” Jana pulled Margo toward the door. “Okay! I will show you! Then we eat!”

A red umbrella seemed to pop out of nowhere. It burst open as Jana hauled her back into the yard, locking an arm around her as they slogged toward the pool and the cottage behind it.

Jana leaned closer, yelling over the storm. “That was the casa, where I stay and your mother when she is here. This is the swimming pool, it’s nice in the morning and afternoon. This is the wash-yourself house, here is our boarding house, researchers stay here.

“The stables—” she pointed down the pitch-black hill— “and there, a little stream that wraps around and goes into the caves!”

Margo took deep and peaceful breaths as Jana swam her toward the bottom of the observatory tower. Its bright metallic dome stretched maybe fifty feet above the house; its base, a vertical rectangle, looked to be made of bamboo.

“That bottom part is cabana. The cabana is strong. It is built to help the observatory stand for the hurricane. There are dorms there, too, for guests.”

Margo opened her mouth to ask where she’d be sleeping, but Jana had that covered. “You have to stay in the cabana. It is the only space. We have team from Tokyo, team from Australia, team from the Hawaii O—Hawaii observatory. So I say, you stay two weeks on the top floor of cabana, then we move you to guest house. Some rooms are being renovated, but it’s okay. There’s a room, it’s a dormitory. Very safe. You will see.”

Margo pressed her lips tight as Jana led her to an ivy-covered door. The woman threw her slim arm out, pointing to a stone path that stretched the thirty or so feet between the edge of the casa and the bottom of the observatory.

“There is door to the house. This is how you come.”

“Okay.”

“We will talk now! I’m sorry your mother is gone! I will be your mother while you are here! I will watch for you! Keep you safe from kidnapping!”

Margo stepped away from the woman and her umbrella. “I think I need some time alone.” She was being unforgivably rude, but she hadn’t realized the whole kidnapping thing was public knowledge. She needed to regroup. *Now*.

Realization spread over Jana’s face. “Oh. I understand.” She brought her red-nailed fingers up to swirl around one ear. “You’re feeling crazy! Need some air to breathe!”

“Exactly.”

“It is good! You rest! Then come back down! You on fifth floor, okay? The room is pink. Pink curtains. You will see.”

Margo nodded. She slogged into the stairwell, tracking in a small pool. A dim orange light flickered above her, lighting up a concrete cage. It smelled like mildew and dirt, and was shockingly quiet given the rain. She leaned against the wall and shut her eyes, focusing on her breathing so she didn’t kick into a panic attack.

Breathe. Just breathe.

She noticed an elevator in a little round alcove to her left. It was pale yellow on the inside, with mirrors that showed her just how horrible she looked. It spit her out on a hall that looked...skinned. The wallpaper had been ripped off the walls, and the carpet off the floor, so the fluorescent lights illuminated a glue-streaked, spot-stained cement wasteland. Her inner diva popped to the surface, because seeing the place...it made her eyes water.

Surely she wasn't staying *here*.

She yanked open the first two doors; each revealed a spacious powder-blue room jammed with fold-out chairs and card tables. The third room, which she entered with her eyes closed, was empty, and the walls were also stripped. The fourth and last door opened to a stale-looking, off-white room, with stiff gray carpet and bunk beds made of worn-looking wicker. There were a couple of study tables and two dressers—none from the same set—and a desk next to one of the bunks. She noticed the lack of television and felt a flash of relief. Not her room. Obviously.

Then she noticed the windows punched into the wall in front of her. They were tall, wide, and covered by curtains. *Pink* curtains. And then, like she was seeing them for the first time, Margo realized that the walls were pink as well. Pale, faded, icky pink.

This was it. The pink room.

She shut the door, moving like a zombie, and turned to inspect the nearest bed. It was the only one with bedding, and it was gross. The faded floral comforter must have been there since the place was built. It was paper-thin, with dozens of loose threads. She pulled it back and turned her nose up at the just-as-ratty sheets. They had been white once, but were stained some kind of ivory yellow by probably a billion bodies. Margo sat down on the bed, pressed her face into her hands, and sobbed. In her mind, she sobbed and sobbed and sobbed, until there was nothing left to get out. But when she lifted her face, her cheeks were dry and warm.

She felt like someone else. Someone cold. Someone who slapped people. Maybe she deserved this room in this deserted tower. Maybe she deserved to be kidnapped for ransom. She wondered if Cindy would pay it.

Sighing angrily, she walked to the windows, hoping for at least a good view—which she had. Beyond the pine grove, Puerto Rico was a silver jewel on a plate of black.

At least there's that.

Sighing again, she turned away and spied a door she'd missed: the bathroom. It was big: a row of lockers, five showers, and several stalls. Margo ran her finger along the white tile wall, then peeked into the showers. There was body wash in the first, and boy shampoo—Mountain Freshness; she'd never heard of it before. She found an old, chewed toothbrush on a soap dish at one of the sinks. Margo picked it up with a paper towel and dropped it in the trash. How did the cleaning people miss that?

She floated back into the room. She'd get a shower once her bags arrived, and then she'd decide what to do about this place. And how to apologize to Logan Greer.

Logan slammed the thick steel door behind him, heart drumming like Bonzo Bohnam. He took two steps into the wide, dark room and collapsed at the nearest desk.

Fuckity fuck fuck. Margo Zhu. No, *Ford*, but she was still Cindy Zhu's daughter.

I'm so fucked.

He had almost crashed the Zhu Observatory's plane, with the Zhu heiress inside. Worse than that, he had hit on her. Promised to take her *riding*. Was he an f-ing moron?

He rubbed a hand over his face and looked across the room, inspecting the rows of cubicles. He was in the data tracking room, the place where they crunched numbers, ran sims, and made charts. Each of the low, felt-covered walls enclosed desks with specially rigged monitors and CPUs. There was a massive printer to his left, calibrated to spit out pictures wider than Logan was long.

He had just found another wobble, so it should've been easy, here in this room, to think about work. But all he could think about was her. Which was a problem—for so many reasons.

He wiggled his prepaid phone out of his pocket. His left hand dropped it on the countertop and swirled it in a circle, while his right hovered over the crotch of his jeans. He shut his eyes and inhaled deeply. Then he moved his hand up to the table.

He kept his eyes shut, wondering what Margo would say about the plane ride. He'd lied to her about the initial turbulence because he didn't want to freak her out, but of all the dumb luck, they had to hit a flock of f-ing gulls. Now she thought he'd almost killed them showboating. She'd been so rattled she'd slapped him. It had to take some intense fear to make a blue-blooded heiress lose it like that.

Hell, the whole thing was probably for the best. Maybe she'd do him the favor of avoiding him.

Spreading his legs and moving stiffly, so his boxers wouldn't make the situation in his jeans any worse than it already was, he leaned up in his chair and grabbed his phone.

He gritted his teeth, punched the number. *Get a grip.*

He had sworn off relationships, and sex in general, after his last one had ended badly. Valerie had basically stalked him, going so far as to trash his dorm room and steal his laptop. He'd almost had to get the police involved, which would have really screwed things up for him. Even worse, her family was connected, and those connections included Cindy—his benefactor.

He remembered the day he'd found her sitting in his room.

We haven't lost focus, have we?

No ma'am, we haven't.

Logan pushed Margo Ford out of his head with a growl. He was going to Mars. Fucking going. The truth of it had made celibacy a lot easier. While every other guy in Cambridge had been chasing trim, Logan was putting even more time into his studies. Making himself even better. He had never imagined he'd face more temptation on Isis than he had around thousands of college girls.

The phone rang nine times before he punched a code to end his pirate program. He'd written it himself in the aerospace lab back at school. It was the only way he could afford a prepaid phone without buying a million minutes. It wasn't exactly legal, using his own coding to tap into the cellular phone networks, but nobody policed it.

He checked the clock. Eight oh-six. He'd missed her normal after-dinner call—the only place his phone got service was right here in the data room—and right now she was probably at that party for the cheer squad—so it was on to the answering machine.

Her message was the first and only, and Logan's gut clenched as he pressed play. There was a little intake of breath, the moment where his body always tightened.

“Hey bro, it’s Maggie, giving you your update for today. Cheerleading practice was pretty good. I think I’m gonna be a base next year, ’cause a lot of the other girls are shorter than me. I miss you. Um...as far as everything else...well, dad took the car away. Mama got mad because some stuff she needed for the students was in it. She called the bank, and Mrs. Porter said they hadn’t taken it. Maybe he lost it in a bet. I didn’t think he was gambling anymore...but I don’t know, he could have needed money.

“You asked last time how many he’s taking. I think twelve yesterday. Yeah, that’s three more than the day before, in case you forgot. But it’s been pretty much okay. He’s drinking a lot, too, so he’s mostly just been sleeping. So.” She clucked. “There ya go. Nothing to be worried about, and I mean that. He’s being better these days. Probably ’cause it’s so hot here.

“Okay, well, I love you, Logan. Have fun on your island. Catch a star for me.” She giggled. “That was cheesy. Okay. Buh-bye.”

Logan listened to the message one more time with an ear for the inflections in his sister’s voice. He could never catch every detail the first time because he was always too worried the news would be bad. *Mama got banged up again, we went to the ER.* Or worse: something with Maggie. She’d turned thirteen just a few weeks ago, and Logan would cut out his heart to keep her safe.

He deleted the message, satisfied that things were as well as they could be, and again noticed his...problem. Even after all that, it was still above half-mast, and when a few laps around the room only brought it to full attention, he decided to do something about it.

The door didn’t have a lock, but he didn’t figure he’d be getting any company. The Japanese team had the night off. They were stuffed into the guest house playing some game that involved a deck of cards and dice. The Australian team didn’t start for another two hours, and the Hawaii team wouldn’t be back till midnight. Still, he picked the most secluded desk to drop his jeans.

Margo sighed as she stepped out of the shower. The steamy air had cleared her mind, and she'd been able to improve her feelings about everything. Especially Logan. She would find him right away and make sure he was okay, and then she'd apologize profusely for the atrocious thing she'd done. There was no excuse for that kind of behavior—she still couldn't believe she'd done it; every time she pictured it she felt sick—but maybe she could make it up to him somehow.

Wondering what, if anything, she could do to make him like her again—even just a little—she padded into the bedroom, where she found her trunks stacked against a wall. She picked out a pale green Dolce & Gabbana dress, and bent over to rummage through her underthings. She was pulling a thong up from her ankles when the door opened. She heard a sharp breath and spun around.

Logan. His face was hazy, but his huge silhouette was unmistakable. She could see his wide eyes and his lolling jaw and *HOLY CRAP SHE WAS NAKED!*

Margo's feet moved before her brain could tell them where, and she fell backwards, slamming her head against the bottom bunk with the force of the Obliviate spell. It pushed everything right out of her head except the pain, and she held her hair, moaning. Through bleary eyes she saw that Logan had come halfway across the faded carpet. He had stopped with his face all stretched out, like he had never seen a naked girl before.

She hugged her legs. "Look away!"

He did, and she scrambled up into the bunk, jerking the old comforter over her throbbing head.

Cue the crickets.

Margo's mortification intensified with every millisecond—and with it, her temper. "Have you ever heard of knocking?"

"How was I supposed to know you'd be here!"

"Maybe because it's my room?"

There was a long pause, during which Margo wondered if Logan had left. Then, in a steely voice that surprised her, given how he'd acted earlier, he said: "This isn't your room."

He sounded so angry that she forgot her embarrassment and poked her head out of the covers.

He was standing in the same place he'd been before, and just the sight of him seemed to strike a match inside her chest. There was something marvelous about him, an instantaneous allure that blended shock and recognition, like she was meeting him again for the first time in a thousand years.

It was weird.

He looked at her trunks and her towel, and followed her footprints to the bathroom. His lovely mouth twisted, like he was looking at a child's finger painting and finding it...messy.

"Well?" she demanded.

He took a deep breath, shoulders rising and falling. "This isn't your room," he said. "It's my room. That's my bed you're in."

Which explained why it was the only one with bedding.

Then it sank in—she was *naked* in his bed!—and Margo felt like dying. "Look, I'm really sorry. I would never have come in here if Jana hadn't told me to."

"Obviously you misunderstood," he said dismissively.

Margo bristled. "Why obviously?"

"Obviously because this is your mother's island and you're an heiress. So you get to stay in a nice room."

An heiress. So that's all he saw, even after what she'd told him on the plane. She remembered

how nice she'd felt, settled in close to him. With his shoulder touching hers, his patient voice explaining how the plane worked. He'd really seemed to like her. And Margo had ruined it.

God, she was an idiot. And she was still being one, because Logan was staring at her like he expected her to say something. What had he said?

Nice room...

"All of the nice rooms are taken," she said airily.

"What about your mother's room?" She frowned, and he tilted his head behind him. "You know... fifth floor of the casa?"

Score! Margo could have hugged him for putting the X on her map, but his steely, frozen face stole her nerve.

"No to that?" he said. "Fine. There's an empty room next door."

Indignation burned her cheeks. How could he even think of sending her to one of those nasty rooms?

"Why don't you stay next door if you like the idea so much! You can sleep on the floor with a chair for a pillow."

"Why should I be the one to move?"

"Well..." She couldn't think of a good reason. One she thought he'd accept, anyway.

"So?" he prodded.

"So you're from the South. Aren't you supposed to be a gentleman?"

"No more than you're a lady."

Margo's mouth fell open. She couldn't believe this... *asshole*. She took a deep, long breath, focused on her hand slapping his face. She still hadn't apologized. No wonder he thought she wasn't a lady. She sat up straighter and met his eyes. "I'm really very sorry about how I acted on the—"

"I don't care about that." His voice was a growl, his face a tight mask.

"Then what's the problem?"

"You are," he snapped. "You're just another—" *spoiled rich bitch*.

She guessed that's what he would have said; he clamped his mouth closed before he could finish, turned, and stomped out the room, slamming the door so hard the doorknob rattled.

*

Margo marched through the wet yard, determined to find Jana and request a change of venue. She'd ask, with dignity and manners, if she could move one of the bunk beds into that empty room. It had a few cobwebs, but she could handle that. *No, no*, Jana would say, not for Cindy Zhu's daughter. Space would be made in the casa.

But what if it wasn't?

Then Logan would be moved. To the barn, with the rest of the animals, because she was starting to think that's where he belonged.

Shame, anger, and hurt warred inside her tight chest. She'd compared and contrasted his behavior in the plane, and then in the observatory dome, and there was only one conclusion: when they'd first met, he'd felt sorry for her. The realization hit Margo like a fly ball. He knew her dad had died, her mom had ditched her, and—*c'mon*—she'd been pitiful. She'd *cried*.

She'd cried, and then she'd slapped him.

Margo pulled open the casa door and strode toward the gentle roar of voices, telling herself she *could* show her face. The long, shadowy hall led her under several blue-tiled archways, down three wide stairs, and into a dining hall as big as a ballroom. It had stucco walls, lots of ferns, and palm-frond fans hanging from the high ceiling.

The kitchen was sunken on the left end—an octagon with a wide, low counter that opened it to the rest of the room. The counter was piled with food and surrounded by people.

She put a hand to her ear, trying to block out the island music, and scanned the crowd for Jana. Instead, she spotted *him*. Logan. He was wearing a new t-shirt—slightly tight and grey, with something stenciled above his left peck. His cheekbones sported stripes of pinkish heat, and that dark, wavy hair fanned around his face. His tiger smile was fit for a toothpaste commercial. His lids looked low, those tired eyes lazy.

Margo steeled herself against another wave of anger and regret, and followed his gaze to a wicker table. There, at its furthest edge, was Janna, breaking off two pieces of a fruit sculpture and passing them to two bouncing red-haired boys.

Heck, yeah! Margo was closer! She bounded to the woman's side.

"Hola," Jana chirped. "You are settled in?"

Margo opened her mouth to get straight to the point, but the twins began to shriek. They dashed off, weaving through the legs of the kitchen staff, tripping and jumping to... *him*. For a horrible second, Margo thought Logan was Jana's boy toy—but no. That was ridiculous. As well as totally irrelevant.

Logan knelt to greet the boys, his eyes flashing first to their mother, then to Margo, and Jana seemed to fall under his spell. She stepped toward him, indicating with a sweep of her arm that Margo should do the same.

She had no choice.

Someone handed her a glass of red punch, and she downed it too quickly, then forced herself through a group of chattering researchers. They patted her and grinned at her, and she had to greet them all. A few feet away, Logan was speaking, Jana nodding. Margo took a deep breath and closed the distance.

"You did not tell me you had a problem with the plane! So terrible!" Jana's eyes jerked from Margo to Logan, inspecting them like a mama bird. She grabbed Margo's arm and squeezed Logan's shoulder.

"Logan, you were afraid? Mar-goooo?" She tugged her gaze away from Logan's solemn face and shook her head at Margo. "Pfft! That is not a welcome! You know," she continued, her face lighting up, "Logan is the best pilot we have. He is the smartest. He is only 18 and already half-way through MIT!" That said with the enthusiasm of his own mother.

Margo glanced at him through the dark fringe her lashes and found his face a stone. No, not quite. His lip twitched. "I think the plane's okay. Just some broken blades. I can fix it on my own time."

Jana shook her head. "Oh, no. We take care of that! And I'm sorry to Mar-gooo again! And thank you to you." She pressed her finger on Logan's t-shirt, between the twin curves of his pecs, and he flinched.

Margo seized her chance. "Did you mean to put Logan and I in the same room?"

Jana's mouth dropped open. She clamped her palm over it. "Oh, noooo. No. That was an accident!" Margo held her breath, waiting for some sweet acquittal. It didn't come. Jana shook her head, strawberry hair bouncing. "I am sorry. There is no other place."

Margo and Logan spoke at once. He said, "There's the room above the barn," while Margo thrust her arm up like an over-eager pupil. "I can move."

Jana looked from face to face, brows clenched like she was thinking hard. Her eyes settled on Logan. "Logan, you are good, sí?"

She looked at Margo. "You think he's a handsome man?"

Margo choked, but Jana wasn't waiting for her answer.

"The two of you—" She lifted her hand, pointing from Logan to Margo— "you stay there for two weeks. Only two. Team Tokyo goes home, I have more room."

"I'll stay in the stables," Logan said firmly, but Jana shook her head. "No, no, no. No stables."

Mar-goo will not bite. You will bite her?"

Grimly, he muttered, "I won't."

"Sí! Logan, you be Mar-goo protector. We will be watching out for Margo. Not let anything bad happen."

Logan looked like he wouldn't mind something 'bad' happening, but he nodded.

"I want you to be friends. You are both young, bonito! I give the deck to you. You going outside!" She squeezed Logan's shoulder. "You do this for me! Eating with a beautiful girl, it is not so bad!"

Logan rubbed his eyes, setting off fireworks that made his head throb harder. He'd gotten a beast of a headache after that argument with Margo.

He sighed. He knew Jana was European, but really? Did she think he wasn't a guy?

He pushed the deck door open and stepped down onto the tile floor, wondering what exactly he was supposed to say. He'd planned on ducking out of dinner, but apparently Jana had alerted Oscar to her plan. The jovial chef had pulled him aside, encouraging him to "take some time. Ella es lonely."

Logan squeezed between the table and the wall. The porch was small, just a round purple table pinned by screen and stucco. But still, it dwarfed Margo. She seemed folded into herself, huddled over her plate, her shoulders not half the size of his. Her brown curls spilled down the chair's thatched back.

She didn't look up as he sat down. Didn't flinch when his plate slipped from his sweaty hands and clattered onto the table.

"Sorry," he muttered.

His gaze glided over the soft lines of her profile, to her rich brown eyes, her luscious hair. Her lips were gently full, her cheekbones sketched up high, like her mother's. But where Dr. Zhu's face was wide and smooth, Margo's was heart-shaped and...detailed.

Logan didn't know how to explain it, but there was a lot in the tip of her chin, in the twist of her mouth and the scrunch of her dark, smooth brows. She was pretty, but there was something else...

He glanced back up at her. Drawn into herself, she reminded him of a rabbit about to leap. The thought made him remember what Jana said about protecting her. He wondered from what. He imagined wrapping his arm around her waist, pulling her close against his side. He remembered the way her hand felt in his.

It didn't matter, he told himself. Didn't matter what he wanted. All that mattered was his family, and the freedom he could buy them—and himself—if he kept pleasing Cindy Zhu.

*

Margo wished with all her heart that she could disappear. Just poof herself from Isis to Elizabeth's house at Tahoe. The Timberdimes would be drinking gin and playing chess, smoking Cuban cigars and making crude jokes about Republicans. Wild and raucous and totally cozy. Nothing like the stifling awkwardness going down on the small patio at Casa de Zhu.

As Margo brought a fork-full of fried banana to her mouth, she wondered which was thicker—the humid air or the anxious aggression rolling off her new roommate. He glanced at her plate, then began cutting his enchilada, silverware scraping china with a squeak that pinched her bones.

He put a bite in his mouth. Chewed.

She took a long sip of her orange juice.

He cut another piece.

She considered just chugging her whole glass, taking her plate and leaving without a word. *He* could eat alone. She could run up to the room, grab her cell phone and see if—

"So." His low voice made her jump. She glanced up. His face was bleak. As was his tone, when he asked, "How's it going?"

She froze with her fingers around her glass. *How's it going?* Surely he was making some joke,

but his face was...well, still bleak.

She looked back at her plate. Pushed some grits around. *It's terrible*, she thought, and wanted to tell him he was why. She settled for "fine."

She picked up her fork again, spearing a piece of enchilada. She was conscious of his eyes on her as she closed her lips around it. He was watching her so closely. Like he'd seen her naked.

The shock of the memory made her throat constrict, and a lump of chicken got stuck. She gulped for air, but nothing could get in.

She rushed her glass to her lips, and Logan started rising from his chair. She stuck out her hand and waved until he sat back down. "I'm fine," she gasped.

His eyebrows arched, but the rest of his face was cruelly passive. "Good," he mumbled. "Glad you didn't...choke."

Margo laughed, but it was more a snort. He didn't sound like he was glad.

"Right," she murmured, glancing sideways at him.

For the next sixty seconds or so, there was nothing but the swish of the fan and the thin scrape of silverware. Through the gauzy screen walls, she saw lightning bugs sparkling against the dark, dripping yard. The moon's glow spilled pearly light on the gently sloping treetops, and Margo thought how far they were now from the terror of the plane. Had that even happened?

Yes, it had.

And how wretched was her luck?

She was shoveling sweet potato in her mouth when his voice rumbled again. She looked over, thinking he was going to speak, but apparently he was just clearing his throat.

Good grief, how awkward was this going to get? Friends or not, they should be making conversation if they were stuck out here.

"Do you guys always eat this late?" she tried.

"It just depends." Those blue eyes found hers, and it was like a puzzle clicking into place. Margo felt her face warm up and prayed he couldn't see it in the flickering candle light.

"On what?"

"Other researchers. Where they are. This is breakfast for the Japanese team."

"Guess that explains this." She gestured to her grits and her bananas.

He nodded. Even... was that a not-frown? Their eyes met again—nothing exploded. Feeling a shade better, she returned to work on the banana.

"You like this kind of food?" he asked.

They were talking to each other!

She felt a little rush, followed by a surprising urge to keep the convo rolling. "I like it okay," she said. "I really like your accent, too. It's Southern."

He smirked. "Is your accent Californian?"

"I don't know." Was he making fun of her? Well, fine. If that's how he wanted to be, she would definitely quit trying. He surprised her when, a second later, he said, "So..." His deep voice vibrated in between them, his strong hand flexing as he twirled his fork. "You ride."

"Yeah," she said, only half-sure he was talking about horses.

"You ever go to competitions?"

"I do."

"Like mother like daughter, huh?" He smiled slightly.

"I guess." She looked down at her plate, deciding not to go on. She'd lost her read on him, and she wasn't about to get personal again.

"So, you go to boarding school?"

"Yes, I do."

“Me too. Well, I did.”

“You did?” She looked up at him, at that one dark strand of hair drooping over his brow, at his wildly handsome face, at his body, which was big and taut, like a great, prowling cat. A leopard, maybe, or a puma. Of all the boys she’d known, this one seemed the least tame. He slouched. He cursed. Even now, his big hand clutched the fork like a weapon. “*Really?*”

As soon as she said it, she wanted to die. He’d definitely stamp her as a spoiled bitch now.

She heard a deep breath from him, but didn’t dare to look. Here it came. The scathing bite-back.

Instead he said, “I work a lot. You won’t see me much around the room.”

He slid his chair back, and she could feel him getting up. Margo lunged, catching his large, solid wrist. “Don’t. I, um, I want to...get to know you more.”

She’d shocked his socks off; she could see it on his face.

“I’m sorry for making assumptions.” She forced herself to meet his cool gaze. “I know that most boarding schools are very expensive. Out of range for most people. Anyway, I’m sorry.”

His face was stiff as marble, so she just kept going—still holding onto his warm wrist.

“I’m sorry for earlier, too. For how I behaved earlier tonight, and for whatever happened in the room. I really just want us to be friends. Friend-ly.” Margo shut her eyes.

“It’s okay.”

He tugged his arm free, and she sat her hand down in her lap. “No it’s not.” She’d acted like an idiot since she’d been on Isis. “I *slapped* you.” The words felt like putty in her throat. When she spoke again, she had to work to contain a sudden sob. “I can’t believe I did that.”

“I deserved it.”

“Of course you didn’t!”

He just shrugged, like people slapped him all the time. She couldn’t stand the tension that quivered in the air—tension from him; she’d made him uncomfortable somehow—so Margo blurted something else. “What do you really do here at the O? Isn’t that what you guys call it?”

He traced the flower outline on his napkin as he looked at her.

“The O,” he confirmed, and there was another second of silence. How different he seemed here than at the airport. So...solemn.

“I find planets,” he said finally. “Work with horses. Fly a little. About that...” She heard his soft exhale, watched him press his palm down on the table as his head shook slowly. “That’s not how things usually go.”

He was trying to make her feel better. Which meant he didn’t hate her. Which meant they could be friends—maybe. She wanted to let him know she didn’t hold their plane trouble against him, but she couldn’t say it was okay. “I don’t think I’ll ever like to fly.”

“Should,” he muttered, picking up his fork. “You’ll be doing it enough.”

“Not really. Just to and from school. I’m there all year.”

“You won’t always be.”

“Yeah, well I don’t plan to be another Cindy.” She’d do her own thing. Work a for-pay job. She wasn’t unintelligent, but she also wasn’t Cindy Zhu. How could she be?

Logan nodded, setting down his fork again. He glanced at the yard, like he wanted to go out the screen porch door, before folding his napkin in half. “Grew up living with your dad?”

“Yeah.”

“He seemed like a good guy.”

So he’d read about her father. Of course he had. Raymond Ford was controversial. A real firebrand.

“I miss him,” she murmured. “But everything will be okay.”

It hurt to say so, because it didn’t feel true, but she had to say something. She didn’t figure *I just*

recently stopped wanting to die with him would interest Logan very much. Nor would, *Yeah, maybe it will be okay if I can get to know the parent I have left or Nothing will ever be okay again so I might as well get kidnapped.* Logan didn't care about her, or the group of psychopaths that wanted to kidnap her.

As if in confirmation, he put the napkin down and propped his elbows on the table. "Like I said, I work a lot. Being here is really important for me..."

She nodded, wondering where he was going. He fidgeted in his chair, brushed his hair out of his face. Finally, she said, "I won't mention the plane thing to Cindy."

"It's not that." Logan closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "You saw Jana's boys. Roberto and Ricardito. Good kids. We've got a pool. Some caves..."

Oh, God. He was trying to give her a list of things to do. Ways to entertain herself, so she wouldn't pester him.

What the F ever.

Margo's head felt so hot she could hardly see straight, but she managed to keep her voice steady. "I can entertain myself."

"I didn't say you couldn't," he drawled.

But he'd implied, and she wondered if everyone on the island saw her the same way—as a charity case. She sat up straighter, folded her arms across her chest. "You shouldn't feel an obligation to check up on me. I'm fine. I don't plan to be here for very long, either."

"Oh? When are you leaving?" He sounded raptly curious.

She held her head high and evaded the question. "I have no reason to stay. I had wanted to find out more about my mother, but that's not happening. I'm sure I'll find some way to evade the kidnappers."

"Kidnappers?" His eyes narrowed, and she said, "You don't know about that?"

His eyes widened. "You're serious."

"That's the real reason I'm here."

He slowly shook his head. "Makes sense," he said blandly. "Jana told me to find you at your terminal and bring you straight to the plane."

"You were late," she said.

"Yeah." Both his tone and expression were dismissive. Like she didn't matter. Like he'd never held her hand. "Well, this place is definitely safe. Everyone here knows everyone, so it'd be hard for anyone to get you."

"In that case I don't need your help. We can share a room without having to be friends."

"Good," he murmured, pushing back his chair. "I'm not signing up to be one."

Several hours later, Margo slipped inside the side door of the casa. She felt like a criminal, and how dumb was that? This was *her* house—kind of. It would be one day. Wasn't that why she'd stopped off in Atlanta on her way to Kerrigan nine months ago? The memory of that first (well, second) clinical interaction with Cindy made her frown as she glided down the darkened hall. All they'd done was sign paperwork.

She had hoped her stay on Isis would be good, but it was turning out much worse than she could have imagined.

Originally, it had been the kidnapping threats that had her twisted into knots. Cindy's people hadn't told her anything specific, but she'd overheard Elizabeth's stepmother talking about it, and she'd heard the word "terrorist." She'd also seen a report on CNN, where a man in a tacky ready-made suit told the world about her troubles.

Which now meant every kidnapper in the world (or at least the ones in countries with CNN) knew that snatching her would earn a ransom. Excellent.

Sad thing was, Margo didn't really care. Not like she should. Her mind was too clouded by images of Cindy on her popular investing talk show, *Zhu's*. Despite Cindy's solemn face and a tendency toward sharpness with the dumber callers, Margo had thought she'd seemed nice enough. She'd had expectations. Maybe even—*oh, no*—fantasies.

As she tiptoed down the hall, she told herself her negligent chromosomal donor didn't matter. The woman was halfway across the world. Logan, on the other hand, was a problem she'd have to deal with immediately. Like when she sneaked back into *their* room.

She would understand if he was pissed, because, hello, she'd slapped him after he'd flown her weepy self to Isis. But after a lot of thought, she'd decide angry wasn't the message he was sending. He'd acted like she had Ebola when he'd found her in his room, and dinner had been amazingly awkward. Awkward rather than angry. Why? She was beginning to think his apathy at the end of their conversation wasn't actually disinterest at all. It had seemed so...intense.

Margo rubbed her eyes, wishing she had never come to Isis. But since she had, she was going to get some of the answers she was seeking. Namely how her parents had met, and why Cindy had give up all parental rights, as well as why she'd resumed them when Margo's dad had died.

She followed the hallway past several polished doors that she guessed led to bedrooms—she heard a man snoring from beneath one; the kitchen—she refused to glance toward the patio; and several island-themed sitting rooms. She got excited when she found a spiral staircase in a window-dotted library, but it only went to the fourth floor.

As Margo started back down the staircase, holding onto the rail and focusing on her feet so the slick bottoms of her sandals didn't slip, she heard a sound like a pile of books falling off a shelf. She froze for a moment, then trotted the rest of the way down. Where she ran straight into a blond guy.

"Yipes!" The high-pitched word was an Elizabeth-ism, her Kerrigan friend's impression of another girl, Kathy Leon. Kathy was a gleeful, gangly dork who grinned at everyone with food in her braces and was always tripping over things and saying (what else): *Yipes!*

As she looked into the blond man's face, Margo felt a brief shot of embarrassment. The guy—was he old enough to be called a man?—was attractive, with the hard, well-angled face of a movie star and a kissable mouth that formed a small "o" when she bumped into him.

"I'm so sorry." She stepped back, feeling clumsy and disoriented.

Blondie smiled, revealing a mouthful of straight, small teeth. Ick. The teeth were oddly squarish and very unappealing. They made him look like an animal, and not a cuddly one.

"I'm very sorry," she said again. Mr. Teeth smiled at her so long she wondered if there was something wrong with him. Then he said, "It was my fault," and she realized he wasn't weird. Just... Austrian? Yes, he sounded Austrian, and he was likely also a scientist. Weirdness explained.

He moved back with a courtly wave of his hand, and Margo stepped down onto an oriental rug in a study on the first floor.

"It wasn't your fault," she said pleasantly, in the voice she reserved for adults she didn't know.

"Nonetheless, I offer my apology." He gave a brief bow, and when he rose, he smiled again. "May I assume you are Cindy Zhu's daughter, Margo?"

Margo inhaled. Exhaled. "That's right," she told him calmly. "And you are?"

"Daniel. I come from Austria to study—" he twirled his finger, like he couldn't remember the word— "astronomy."

"Nice to meet you, Daniel."

"And you."

"Well, I've got to go."

"Wait, I—"

She didn't wait to hear what he had to say. He gave her the creeps, and besides, she didn't want anyone to know she'd been in the casa at this hour. She heard him on her heels as she breezed down the hall, and ducked behind a statue, holding her breath. He turned a circle, muttered something, and walked away.

A few steps later, she spotted a housekeeper and ducked behind a stuffed armchair while the woman passed. By the time Margo found another stairway, discreetly placed between a parlor and a sunroom, she felt exhausted by the combination of sleuthing stress and her angst.

She shouldn't be here—on Isis or snooping in Cindy's house. And yet, when the stairway ended at the fourth and highest open-to-the-public floor, she didn't return to the cabana. Instead, she felt energized, consumed by her curiosity about the fifth floor.

After another ten minutes of dead ends, abstract art, and general weirdness (the casa had two entire rooms on the fourth floor dedicated to taxidermied birds), Margo slipped into a ladies' room on the third floor to regroup. And there, in the center of an old-timey powder room, she found a ribbon of stairs that led to the fifth floor.

She came out in a moonlit dome filled with dozens of lilies. The dome fed into two long hallways; she picked the one with royal blue walls, ornate molding, and blood red curtains. She passed studies, workrooms, libraries, and parlors. The rooms got bigger and more elaborate, until finally, at the end of the hall... bingo!

Cindy's room.

It had to be.

An enormous mahogany bed spread out against the jade green wall, its headboard an immense dragon so intricately carved it seemed alive. Rolling wood flames spewed from its long-tongued mouth, climbing toward a cloud of gleaming mahogany smoke that stretched almost to the ceiling. Each of the bed's four posts was a smaller dragon; together they supported a red silk canopy that arched over the bed and draped down both sides, an elaborate net with bright yellow tassels.

Beside the bed, a stool. Beside the stool, a dresser with a golden ship on top, its sails twinkling with diamond water drops. On the other side of the bed, a narrow, frame-topped table. Margo stepped across the soft carpet and bent to inspect the pictures: dark-haired girl in a ballroom gown, a doll in her small hands; Cindy with an elderly Chinese woman (Margo's great-grandmother?); a small house in a rural village, most likely in China; the last, a yellow Labrador Retriever. For the longest time, she stood there staring at Cindy and the older Chinese woman who seemed to have Margo's mouth. Her teeth felt chattery, her hands weak and damp.

Spurring herself on with the thought of getting caught here, she walked to a glass-topped desk and opened the top drawer. Empty. As was the second. The third held journals, black and leather bound. Margo's hands shook as she opened the first. Nothing. They were all blank. She strode to a floor-to-ceiling bookcase, but nearly all of the titles were in Chinese. Margo turned a circle and noticed a mosaic door she'd originally mistaken for a piece of art. She closed her hand around the lion-shaped knob and pulled.

Wowzers. Cindy's closet was bigger than Margo's old room, and stocked like Bloomingdale's. There must have been fifty rows of shelves and dozens of clothes rods, plus an entire wall of shoes and accessories.

She scanned Cindy's wardrobe. Lots of reds and golds and greens. Vibrant. *Rich*. She stepped inside, feet sinking into fluffy white carpet, and touched the nearest garment: a purple sequined ballroom gown with fringed sleeves. She took another step, grabbing hold of a lipstick-colored pantsuit. She pulled it out, studied the creases in the pants. The thing was ironed to perfection.

Margo squeezed the suit back onto its rack, ran her hands along the row. She paused at a section of skirts. There was something...different about the wall behind them. She pushed the clothes aside and found herself staring at a bookcase with wall-colored, almost-invisible pivots. For a second, she couldn't breathe. Here it was, her chance to learn more about her mother. She dropped down to her knees and traced the edges, looking for a keyhole or a doorknob or...

She moved some books around, knocking a little wooden cube into her lap, and found a teensie keypad embedded in a shelf. *Oh*. She shouldn't be doing this. She dropped her head into her hands.

Numbers...

She knew from her mystery books that the most common codes for safes and alarms were birthdays. She figured it was pointless to try it, but she punched her own in anyway. Not the code. Of course not. She racked her brain for any number she might have read in relation to her mom. She remembered Cindy's birthday. The date Cindy's parents and brother died—the date she had inherited their fortune. The date Cindy earned her doctorate from Stanford.

None of them opened the safe.

Sighing, Margo put her head in her hands, and that's when a long, wide shadow fell into the doorway. She felt a pair of eyes on her, felt the awful heavy beating of her heart. Oh, God. This was it. The terrorists had her.

Margo jumped up in the karate stance. "Aaah!"

She rushed forward, jumping at...a housekeeper? The woman's hands flew to her cheeks and she tripped over her own feet. Margo rushed to her side, but she was already scrambling up. With a quick, "Sorry," Margo dashed toward the door.

"You wait!"

Against her will, her feet stopped moving.

"What you do? You theft?"

"*Theft*?" she murmured, then felt a laugh rise in her throat. "Why would I need to steal? I'm her daughter, you know."

"I tell Jana."

"I wasn't doing anything wrong. I came here looking for...this." Margo thrust out a wooden cube she'd forgotten to drop. "It's a...puzzle."

It looked like one, anyway—one of those fold-out deals you played like a Rubik's Cube.

"I gave it to her," Margo blurted, realizing a beat too late that everyone here must know she and Cindy had only just met.

The housekeeper nodded, her dark eyes never leaving Margo's own.

"Never again, you come up here." She held her right hand up, thumb and pointer finger coming

together.

“Yeah—okay.”

“You *visit* here. Then go home. This,” she said, arm sweeping at the massive room, “not yours.”

*

When she reached the first floor, Margo didn’t feel particularly upset. She didn’t really feel anything. So when she pushed through the foyer door and found herself bolting through the slushy lawn, toward the hangar, she felt surprised. And good. Oh so good to be running away from here. Here where she didn’t belong. Here where no one wanted her.

She’d run track in Napa, and as she moved now, she felt her legs and feet slipping into position. *Heel down, follow through, spring up, lunge forward, now push from the thighs, girls...* She could hear her old coach’s coarse, alto cheers. She could see herself running alongside childhood friends, see them popping Starbursts into their mouths as they practiced on the hot, green track. *Sugar high!* She could hear their laughter, see her father on the bleachers in his khaki shorts and neat white polo. Her father had come to every meet. Every one. Even during campaign season.

That particular memory made her feel like she couldn’t get a good breath, and in the midst of her stupid little breakdown she remembered some lines from a scene in that old movie *Forrest Gump*.

Dear God, make me a bird, so I can fly far, far, far away from here.

Except what did she want to fly away from? Oooh, mommy didn’t love her. She heard a classmate’s whisper—Harriet Sampson, who attended Kerrigan on scholarship. *I don’t know why she acts so put-out all the time. Maybe got her mommy’s money shoved too far up her flat little ass.*

So that’s what she was thinking about as she plunged into the dripping pine grove: *My ass isn’t flat. It’s not really little either.*

Then a hand shot out and grabbed her upper arm, the shock of it stalling her momentum so she spun in place. Something hard and cold struck her temple.

“Aaaaaa!” It was a straight-up shriek. She flinched away and mimed a jumping bean, the way she usually did when a bug got too close for comfort. “Aaah!” She should be FLEEING!

Before she could, two hands grabbed her shoulders, squeezing tight enough to bruise. Her eyes adjusted, showing her a tall man holding a HUGE GUN. Margo shrieked, and her self-defense training kicked in.

If you kick him there, you better not miss...

She didn’t. She made her mark, and the man sank down to one knee, moaning so painfully she wanted to cheer. Instead, she turned to run. No, wait! She spun around, lunging for the machine gun—*MACHINE GUN?!?*—in the mud. She grabbed the heavy thing, hoisting it awkwardly and pointing it at...

LOGAN?

“Aaugh.” He cursed and curled his broad shoulders inward.

“Logan?” *Logan was a terrorist?* “What the hell?”

“Right back at ya...” He croaked.

She tottered back a step. “What the shit are you doing here!”

He had straightened a little, and he was holding his arm out in a stance that might be used to approach a skittish horse.

“I’m serious!” She backed up, pointing the gun at his chest, wondering frantically if she had the nerve to pull the trigger. *Shit!* She didn’t even have her finger on the trigger!

“I’m serious, too.” He looked and sounded surprisingly calm. “Why don’t you put that down and let me explain.”

“No way! I’m getting away!” She started walking backward, big, sloppy steps that had her tripping over roots and fallen branches.

As Logan advanced, she scuttled more quickly, so when she fell, she fell so fast she didn’t know she had until she heard a round of gunfire straight out of the movies. She tossed the gun, then wriggled in the mud like a spastic cat.

She got up running. Logan took her down a second later. She found him on top of her, his head framed by a black sky filled with ridiculously bright stars. He pressed her wrists into the mud and straddled her waist.

She shrieked again. “Stop it! Stop! Let me go!”

Logan shook her wrists. “I was holding Juan’s spot! He’s a guard!”

“A guard?”

“There are guards here, Margo. About two-dozen of them.” Logan moved off her, and Margo felt a sharp, quick ache inside her chest.

“There are?” She rubbed her pounding head, realizing that her hair was wet.

“There sure are.” The syllables were stretched like putty.

“You’re drawling,” she pointed out.

“You got me, city girl.”

She sat up, and Logan’s hand swung down to pull her to her feet.

There was a moment—just a fleeting second—where the two of them were standing face-to-face, just starting at each other. To her surprise, it felt…good. Then Logan dropped her hand. His face turned hard.

“You must be wanting trouble.” He turned away.

“What?” she breathed.

“Don’t leave the casa at night.”

She stood there, feeling electric and empty all at once.

The “gift” she’d taken from her Cindy’s closet was definitely a puzzle. The lines between pieces were well-disguised, but Margo was able to trace them with her fingernail. It was annoying how the pieces wouldn’t budge at all, no matter how she prodded it, but Margo was grateful for the stupid thing. It was a decent distraction.

She dropped the cube into her lap and took a bite out of her pimento cheese sandwich. Oscar had made it for her, but only on the condition that she try the peanut butter and banana fold-over that was still untouched on the other side of the plate. She’d taken it up to her room and noticed immediately that Logan had been there. The bathroom door was open, and... yes, he’d had a shower. He had *not* slept in the room the previous night, or the night before. And he had *not* been at breakfast the morning after their encounter, or the one after. But he *had* sneaked in at some point, so clearly he was avoiding her.

Margo polished off her sandwich and got up from the desk, formulating a plan as she crossed the room.

She shut the door, locking it this time, and wiggled into her skin-tight crimson breeches. She pulled a white tank-top over her head, then fixed her hair so it fell in loose curls down her back. She dabbed some gloss on her lips, smiled weakly at the mirror, and set-off.

Although the hottest part of the day was over, it was still amazingly hot outside. The ground was steaming, the air so humid she was sweating as soon as she set off, trying to ignore the guards who followed her, watching covertly from the trees. Her heart was hammering by the time she came out of the woods—on the side of the forest opposite the runway—and spotted the big brown barn. It sat in the middle of a pasture, alone except for a few scraggly trees.

Margo followed the pebble path around a final cluster of pines, and all of a sudden there he was—Logan, spraying the barn with a hose. Seeing him again jolted her, like putting a 9-volt battery against her tongue. An uncomfortable flush swept her from head to toe, lingering longest in her cheeks.

His pale blue t-shirt clung to him like a second skin, so she could see every flicker of his heavy muscles. He was a big guy, with powerful thighs and a large, rangy frame, but compared to the bulk of his shoulders, his hips seemed slim.

Stupid girl. So what if he’s pretty?

She marched toward him like a warrior charging an enemy, every inch of her tight and ready to spring. One glance was all he was handing out, so she prepared to talk to the side of his head. She was almost surprised when he lowered his arm and turned to look at her, bored and expectant all at once.

“I’m here for a tour of the stables. You know, the one you promised.”

“Not now.” He squeezed the nozzle and water spurted, directed from her to the wall at the last second. “Martinez is in the south pasture, checking on the bulls. And I’m doing this.”

“Spraying the barn?”

“Come back this afternoon.”

“Look,” she said, sticking one hand on her hip. “All I need is for someone to show me where you keep the gear. I can do the rest on my own. Like I told you, I know how to ride.”

His blue eyes flicked over her. “All the same, you better wait for Martinez to get back.”

“Because you’re busy,” she said slowly.

“Because I think you need to get the tour from him.” He clenched the hose handle tighter after that, shifting his body and attention back to the barn.

Margo put her other hand on her hip. “You know what? You’re a prick.”

His eyes narrowed and he opened his mouth, but she shook her head. “You don’t have to like me, but we’re both stuck on this island, and let me tell you this: I don’t like rude Southerners any more than you like...me. And I’m not impressed that you’re smart and science-y, or that you stand around with guns and take care of horses.”

She turned and stalked around the barn, not caring where she was going. All she knew was that she had to get away. She had been wrong to think she could smooth the prickling feelings she had for him. She couldn’t make them taper off or disappear. Her desire sloshed and boiled and steamed inside her chest, bubbling like water on a stove. Her response to him was mortifying, made ten times worse because she didn’t seem to be able to do anything about it—and it was getting worse. Every time she saw him, it got worse.

She walked down a wide, stall-lined hall and pushed, without thinking, through a worn wood door. A massive Arabian stallion snorted at her. Spotting the tack room beyond some boards to her right, Margo let out a tight laugh. She stood on her tip-toes and stroked the horse’s muzzle.

*

Logan raised his arms above his head, spraying the side of the barn with no real focus. It didn’t matter if the damn thing was clean or not. He’d only grabbed the hose after Margo came out of the woods.

He had to be doing something when she came, because there was no way he was spending any time with her. Every shift of her weight in those ass-tight pants made him ache.

Stay Away.

And he would. He had to.

Dr. Zhu was investing in him. Grooming him. She paid his tuition, let him earn enough money to support his mom and sister, introduced him to the right people. He was one of several candidates competing for the same prize: leadership of her company’s first deep-space mission.

His life was about getting it. The shuttle wouldn’t launch for a decade at least, but the board at Equirria Enterprises wanted astronauts picked early.

He was a desirable candidate. An 18-year-old MIT junior with a *weighted* 4.0 GPA and honors in ROTC. He would finish his degree in astrophysics and microbiology in a year, then join the Air Force. They’d foot the bill for a medical degree. He’d finish in three years with a specialty in space medicine, and after spending time flying F-22s, he’d do a little test piloting. It was the old-school way of getting onto a space mission, but Logan thought it was important that he have real experience, in addition to the stuff on his curriculum vitae.

This—being here for the summer—was huge. He had an opportunity none of the other candidates had: to work in Cindy Zhu’s observatory. He did not—DID NOT—need to screw things up by getting too close to her daughter.

He pointed the hose up and sprayed. The breeze broke up the larger droplets, so what landed on Logan was a fine, cooling mist.

Still he remembered the way Margo’s eyes had flashed and her shoulders had trembled when she told him off. It made him feel restless, itchy.

He dropped the hose and scrubbed his hands through his damp hair. He couldn’t focus on a thing but her! The interest he’d never been able to give to any of his girlfriends burst the reservoir for her, and damn if he knew why.

He sighed. Maybe he did. The fact that she didn't seem to have anybody... Logan could relate. And the resiliency, the attitude in the face of it. It felt trite to even think, but there was just something about her...

She was also hot, so that helped.

He turned around to see how far she'd gone, but he couldn't spot her. He shaded his eyes with one hand, looking further, in the trees. He spotted a guard, but no Margo.

Just as he was turning to check the stables, he heard a thunder clap, the sound of hooves beating dirt, and the warbling whinny of a horse. Logan ran into the stable on putty legs, praying she'd taken off on Buckles or Gamma. But no.

The end stall was empty. Margo had taken Apollo, his every-morning project. Apollo, their one and a half year old—the only horse in the barn that wasn't broken.

His antics matched her mood, so at first, Margo was happy to let the stallion run. She tightened her thighs around his girth and leaned over his muscular neck as they flew between giant hay bales. Tears slipped out the corners of her eyes, testament to the horse's amazing speed.

When they crested a hill, she tugged the reins, but the hotshot horse didn't get the point. He barreled down the grassy incline, nearly losing her on a bump. When she jerked the reins, he pranced and spun.

It took all her strength to work him out of his frantic spiral. When she got him straightened out, she directed him left, trying to gently reverse course with a wide u-turn. The horse whined and tossed his glossy black head, whipping right instead.

"Whoa!"

She tightened the reins. Most horses didn't like the metal bit cutting into their mouths, but this one didn't seem to care. In fact, the pain seemed to invigorate him. He took off like a champion, headed straight for a row of pines. Through their thin trunks, Margo could see a glittering creek, and beyond that, on a distant hill, the airport tower. She prayed the water would slow the stallion down.

It didn't.

He wove between the trees and ran toward the creek at breakneck speed. When he saw the water, all his muscles shuddered, but he was going too fast to stop. Margo tried to cut left, where the creek bent slightly; it would give him a few more seconds to slow down.

The horse jerked right, and before his front legs splashed into the water, he reared.

She knew she was screwed even as her fingers brushed the saddle blanket, then grappled blindly with the air. She didn't have time to scream as the trees did a flip-flop with the sky and everything smeared.

Her head hit the ground hard.

Her muttered curse came a little too late, and anyway, it wasn't audible. She didn't have any air inside her lungs.

What she did have was a comet-burst of pain, pain so harsh it was like fire, except it didn't burn, it *incinerated* every inch of her, turning her body into a puddle of agony. She was limp with hurt, and only after an eternity of it was she able to push the ache back to a single point of origin: her head.

She opened her eyes and knew immediately that something was wrong. The sky seemed to fade in and out as it spun. Sensations shorted through her body like crossed wires; her limbs felt numb and jerky.

She closed her eyes, because the blue sky hurt. She shrugged her shoulder, wiggled some fingers. Whatever was wrong, her arms seemed to work. She tried to lift her right one, but it stayed where it lay, in the mud.

Mud. Eeh. She had fallen in the mud again. She wasn't paralyzed, though; she could feel the chilly, wet earth through her shirt.

She squeezed her eyes shut, for some reason thinking of her dad. If he was around... If her dad was still alive, she'd never be anywhere like this. Her eyes teared, and just as abruptly the emotion was gone.

She tensed her shoulders and tightened her back, thinking she could hoist herself up in one roll.

A lightning burst of pain struck her right temple, forcing her to curl up on her side. She was staring at the bushy grass when something like thunder shook the ground.

It was the horse that had thrown her, coming back to finish the job.

She peeked under her arm, but she couldn't see him. He'd run behind her, over toward the stream; maybe he was circling. She clenched her teeth and lifted her head, preparing to make herself sit up and then—

“Margo! *Margo!* Talk to me!”

Logan dropped beside her, hands landing on her side and shoulder. His deep voice shook near her ear.

“Don't move. Can you hear me? *Shit.*” In a shuffle of boots on dirt, he moved around her, his hand never leaving her neck.

Margo blinked her eyes, feeling moisture there. She really shouldn't be crying, but she just felt so weird, and Logan didn't like her, and his hand was rubbing her arm and she liked it. She shouldn't like it.

“Does your head hurt?”

She nodded, and thought she might throw up.

“Okay. Now tell me, who am I?”

“Logan.” It came out sounding small and young. How nice. “I don't like you.” She figured since he'd treated her like h-e-double-l and now she was Humpty Dumpty, it was okay to be upfront. “This is your fault.”

Her eyes shut of their own accord, and she felt him lean down close. “C'mon, Margo, just keep talking.” His hand on her back hovered, tickling. “Tell me what hurts.”

“My head.”

His fingertips felt like butterflies on her temples. “Okay, look up at me for just one second. Tell me if my eyes look blue or brown.”

She swallowed as his eyes got wider. They looked blue...or gray. Right now, blue. “Kind of blue,” she said, gritting her teeth against a shiver as his fingers tickled the skin under her eyes.

“All right. Does this hurt?” he asked, putting more pressure on her temples.

She started to shake her head and winced. “No. It hurts...right here,” she said, twirling her hand around over the lightning bolt just behind her left ear.

“Let me see.” He leaned over her, so his chest was by her face, so close that she inhaled him. Hay and sweat. He cupped her shoulder and squeezed.

“Do you remember what happened?”

She squinted again, shocked to find that she did not.

“We were riding...and he...” What had the devil horse done? Maybe she needed to go back a little more. She swallowed. “I got on that dark horse, and he was kind of hard to reign. Then we...” Crap. She really didn't remember.

“It's okay.” He swept her hair up off her forehead. “I think you can get up now.”

“How do you know?” The whole time he'd been acting like he knew what he was doing. The way he touched her...not like this—she shut her eyes as his fingers stroked her forearm, light and warm—the way he touched her earlier, he had seemed to know. “Are you a doctor?”

It seemed ludicrous to ask, but if he was really, really smart...

She opened her eyes and saw him smile. “I worked as an EMT this past year, to make some extra cash.”

He rubbed her one more time, from her elbow to her wrist. Then he went down to her legs and squeezed her ankles. “No pain here?”

“No,” she whispered.

“I'll help you up. Your head will hurt, and you might feel kind of weak, okay?”

His hoisting grip was strong and firm, and his chest felt hard against her cheek. She wanted to pull

away, but he was right; she did feel tired.

“Any dizziness? You feel sick?”

“No.” She couldn’t look up at him as she answered, but she could feel him peering down at her.

“We’ve got two choices,” he said. “I can either leave you here and go get a truck, or I can put you on the horse with me, and the two of us can ride back together.”

Margo blinked. Things were starting to get weird. Like, her vision blurred, and her legs started to shake. She didn’t plan to say anything because she didn’t trust her voice, so she was shocked when her mouth opened and she said, “Don’t leave.”

“Okay,” he murmured. “We’ll go real slow.” With one arm still around her back, he shifted a little to wrap his other arm around her waist. “Do you think you can walk on your own?”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

As they turned to face the shining stream—there was a whiteish horse beside it—Margo’s hair stuck to his shirt. The slight tugging on her scalp made goose bumps sweep her face. Her sensations were all off. One minute she smelled his deodorant—cool, mountainy—and the next, her nose was stuffy. Logan noticed her snuffle and he stopped.

“It’s okay,” he said lightly, but his arm on her stiffened. “Why don’t I bring her to you.”

He left Margo sitting on a stump, and she watched him jog to the horse. She thought how weird it was: *Now* he was nice.

She felt glad when he helped her up into the saddle. He climbed behind her, sitting so close she could feel him breathe.

He turned them out of the sun, thank God, and she asked, “Why do I feel so crappy?”

“You hit your head.” Near her ear, his voice sounded loud, and she flinched. He mumbled, “Sorry,” and, more softly, added, “Gamma here is a Peruvian Paso. They’re known for their smooth gait. Lean back against me and you can close your eyes. I’m not sure if you noticed, but your sunglasses are broken.”

She hadn’t, and she wondered what else she had missed.

“I’d lend you mine,” he was saying, “but they’re back at the barn. I left as soon as I saw you took Apollo.” He cleared his throat. “I’m really sorry about this.”

“It’s not really your fault. At least not all of it.”

She felt him shake his head. “I should have given you the tour. Apollo’s not trained. I guess you figured that much out.”

“He’s not?”

His chest rumbled with a sort-of laugh. “I can’t believe you got a bridle on him. Did you take off bareback?”

“Bareback?” She laughed, then winced, trying to speak without moving her head. “No way. I fell off the saddle.” Her trainer back in Napa would be shocked.

“And you don’t remember what happened.”

“Yeah.” That was embarrassing, too. It seemed that everything was. She’d gotten all upset, rushed off on a horse she couldn’t ride, and ended up flat on her back with a bump on the head. *He must think I’m an idiot.*

But he didn’t act like it. His arm around her tightened, and he said, “He’s a hellion.”

“So he’s Thirteen and not Eleven?”

When Logan laughed, his chest vibrating pleasantly against her back. “Apollo Thirteen. Yeah, pretty much.” She let him take even more of her weight. “I spend a couple of hours with him every morning; he’s kicked me real good a few times. I’ve got a bruise on my thigh the size of Texas.”

Margo wished he hadn’t mentioned anything about bruises; the thought made her head throb. “Ow.” She hadn’t meant to say anything, but the pain was intense. It made her eyes water, and again

she felt a wave of exhaustion. She leaned back against Logan, feeling his chin brush her hair.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she squeaked.

A few minutes later, that nothing was *not* nothing. She’d started to sweat, and then she’d started to shiver, while the back of her throat got hot and slick, and she started to feel sick...like the way that she felt if she used her iPad in the car.

“You should stop.” She tried her hardest to keep her voice steady and loud. She didn’t want to lean on him. Literally or figuratively.

“You feel sick?”

“Yes,” she exhaled. Then, “Stop *now*.”

She was already pulling her feet out of the stirrups and leaning forward, but his grip on her tightened.

“Hold on,” he said, as blood rushed in her ears. “Sit real still for just a second and listen to me.” She slumped, while the pasture out front tilted and slowly spun.

“That’s good.” As he murmured, he slid his arm around her waist, bringing her back to his chest and leaning up slightly, so her head came to rest in the crook of his big, warm arm. With his left hand curled around her waist and his right one clutching the reins, he nuzzled her hair with his chin; the motion was almost imperceptible, but it tickled her, and that sensation distracted Margo from the typhoon in her stomach.

“You’re not gonna get sick.”

There was strength in his voice. Margo loved it as much as she hated it.

“You’re shivering,” he murmured. “Are you cold?”

She nodded painfully, wishing she could scoot away from him.

Instead, the arm around her waist came up across her chest. “Just relax. I won’t let you fall.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” His voice was a rumble in her ear. “Shut your eyes, okay?”

She did. Closing her eyes, she let her whole sore tired body relax.

“That’s good. I’ve got you. In just a second, you’re going to open your eyes. Do that now. Open your eyes and look down at Gamma’s back. That way the sun won’t hurt as much. It’s important to keep your eyes open, okay Margo?”

“Why?” The word sounded raspy and weird.

“Because,” he said. “You’re going to talk to me.”

“Talk to you?”

“Tell me all about yourself. What’s it like to be Margo Ford?”

She inhaled, filling her lungs slowly, until she felt sure she wasn’t going to be sick. Then she stiffened her spine to see if he’d loosen his hold on her. He didn’t.

“Why do you care?” Hadn’t he told her on the patio that he didn’t want to be her friend?

“I’m interested.” He flattened his hand out on her ribs, resituating just a bit, so she could feel every inch of him, hard and hot. “I’ve been down here since the twenty-first of May with a bunch of astronomers. They’re fine to talk to, but all they’re interested in is space. I love it, too, but, you know, it can get pretty dry...”

She said nothing. She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to say, and it was probably the head trauma, but she found herself tongue-tied.

“...So,” he said at last, “Margo, what’s your favorite movie?”

His voice was a purr, so soft and gentle. Could she trust him? If she remembered he was being nice because she’d hit her head.

“*Star Wars*.”

He laughed, a warm, rich sound. “You really do have a horse named R2D2? I thought you were kidding.”

“Had,” she corrected. “And no, not kidding. *Star Wars* is my favorite.”

“Why?”

“It’s...happy.”

“Happy?”

“It *is* happy. Especially the first one. It’s like a fairy tale.”

“So that’s your favorite? *A New Hope*?” Logan laughed. “You know what that means,” he said.

“No.”

He leaned his head down, so his breath was a puff against her neck. “It means,” he said, slowly and dramatically, so that all the hairs on her arms raised up in prescient splendor, “that you’re possibly—well, probably...my soul mate.”

The world seemed to slow to half speed. The white seagull-looking bird she had been watching took twice as long to reach his branch. The horse seemed to swim through the grass. Even the air stilled, as every cell of her homed in on his voice.

“It’s not easy to find a pretty girl whose favorite movie is *Star Wars*. Do you know how many geeks there are out there who would kill to meet someone like you?” He laughed.

“And you’re a geek?” she asked skeptically.

“Absolutely. I love *Star Wars*. I love the optimism in *A New Hope*. Not that it’s my favorite. I’m a *Return of the Jedi* kind of guy. Luke versus Vader, Leia as a slave.”

The way his words came, tumbling out, bursts of life and air. The way his voice felt, hummed into her ear. The way his shoulders cupped hers as Gamma walked. Each fragment of the moment burrowed deep into her skin, and without any warning, tears stung in her eyes.

Crying—*again*? She widened her eyes, hoping to staunch the flow, and her body must have tensed, because Logan groaned.

“Hey, I’m sorry. I was just yanking your chain. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. You don’t have to lean up like that. Lean back again. If you fall off, Jana will think I’m trying to kill you.”

You are.

"I'm fine," she lied. "My head just hurts."

"I know it's gotta hurt. But we're getting closer now. See?" He nodded, chin brushing her hair. "The barn's just a little ways away. Keep on talking to me. Consider it charity, so I don't worry. Start with where you're from."

He wrapped her close to him, and Margo held her breath, pathetically elated; he would *worry*. "Where I'm from... You mean Napa, or New Orleans?"

"Either one—or both. Why don't you tell me about both of them?"

She took a deep breath, struggling to think. "I'm from Napa Valley. I used to live there with my dad. And then I moved to Kerrigan in New Orleans. It's a girls' school. Really old and schmoozy."

"Schmoozy, huh?" She could hear his smile.

"Everybody there has their own plane. And lots of houses. Like my roommate, Elizabeth Timberdime, she has seven of them."

"That's a lot."

"I've been staying at their home in Tahoe since school got out. It's smaller. Only nine bedrooms. I saw one of their homes in New York state. It had twenty-three bedrooms."

"Your mom's got a lot of houses, too, right? Isn't there a big one out in Bel Air?"

Margo remembered the feature on the Travel Channel. *American Palaces*, she thought it was called, and evidently Logan had seen it, too. Cindy's Bel Air home was off Linda Flora Drive, and Logan was surely thinking it *was* a palace.

She let her breath out, took another one in. It wasn't going to be weird, because she wouldn't let it be.

In a casual tone, she said, "Chandra. It is kind of a palace—so I hear. I've never been inside." She hesitated, then plunged. "You know, I've only really met her twice."

"Only met...your mother?" His voice lilted at the end.

"Like I said—we didn't really know each other until my dad died."

He made a soft sound, a little *oh*.

"It's okay," she lied. "And technically, I guess me and Cindy met three times. Once at birth."

Logan's chest shook, and he emitted sound that couldn't really be called a laugh. It *was* weird.

In the silence that followed, an ice sheet settled over her—the same sensation that always came when she thought about Cindy.

"So no one here said anything about...why I was coming?"

"No," he said quickly. Too quickly.

"Really?"

He cleared his throat. "People here are kind of busy. I'm sure Jana knew about it, but maybe no one wanted to make you uncomfortable."

"Maybe it made everyone feel awkward." Hurt burned through her chest, hurt and shame that she'd even brought this up.

"How so?" he asked.

She looked down at the horse's neck. Flexed her fingers. Figured, what the hell. She wouldn't know Logan after the next week, so why not jump off the cliff she'd climbed? "At one point, one of the big networks reported that I actually had been kidnapped. Someone called Cindy's press person, and somehow the rumor... it got out of hand." She bit her lip, ashamed that she'd felt the need to share something so humiliating. "Cindy thought I'd been taken and she...she offered a reward."

"Okay..."

Margo inhaled deeply. "She offered five-hundred thousand dollars."

Cindy was worth \$25 billion, and she'd offered a measly half a million for her daughter.

"I see," he said simply.

“Yep.”

After a moment, she felt his chin near her neck, heard his voice, soft in her ear. “She obviously doesn’t know how much you’re worth.”

Margo felt her neck burn. She shut her eyes, and for a few minutes, there was only the feel of Logan next to her, only the sound of Gamma’s hooves. She wondered what she should say to break the silence. If she should say anything...

Logan did it for her. “Just a little longer,” he said gently. “Then we’ll use the barn phone and call Jana.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, so glad he’d changed the subject. He’d changed the subject, and yet... things still felt cozy. The realization made her nervous, so she jumped into another subject. “Do you think I have a concussion?”

“Probably.”

“I’ve never had one before.”

She hadn’t meant to sound quite so pitiful, but the pain from her head got into her voice, and Logan sighed. “I’m sorry. I wish to hell that I had given you that tour.”

Maybe it was the remorse in his voice, or because she felt hurt in more ways than her concussion. Maybe it was, again, the head trauma. But for whatever reason, Margo told him exactly what was going through her mind.

“You asked where I’m from... and I’m from nowhere, really. I don’t have a home anymore. My permanent address is a dorm room. It’s kind of funny: no home, and my mom has all those houses.”

Not funny, she thought with disgust. Pathetic. She was shocked when he said, “I feel a little like that, sometimes. I moved to Massachusetts, to go to Milton, when I was eleven, and then to MIT at sixteen. My family’s still in Georgia, but I can’t go back.”

“Why not?” she asked, feeling the tension in his arm around her waist.

“Oh, you know. ‘You can never go home.’” He sounded almost flippant, and even through her pain, Margo could tell he was being evasive.

“I’d go home if I could,” she offered.

“I wouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

If she thought he was tense before, now he was miming a brick wall. His body tightened, inanimate and hard. His fingers around the reigns were clenched into a fist. He let his breath out, a long, painful-sounding sigh, and Margo wished again she could take her question back.

God. He wasn’t going to answer her. They were going to ride all the way back in total silence, with her head throbbing, and her—

“Going back there is...I don’t know. Stifling. I probably should go home more, see my mom and little sister, but I don’t make the time.”

For a while, she thought that was all he was going to say. Then he sighed, like just thinking about home made it hard for him to breathe, and in a quiet voice, he said, “I don’t think home’s the same for everybody.”

“You have your college place,” she offered.

“The good ole dorm.”

“I bet you’re a pro at cooking Ramen.”

He chuckled. “I’m surprised you know of Ramen.”

“I wasn’t reared as a Zhu. We only had three houses.”

“Just three.”

“One of them was a beach house, and the other was a townhouse in Washington. Isn’t that normal enough?”

"Normal enough," he agreed.

She was trying to be light, and she could sense that he was, too, but there was sadness in his tone. She glanced over her shoulder to meet his eyes; they seemed flat, more grey than blue. "You're not exactly Mr. Normal, either, are you?"

He snorted. "Not quite."

She'd meant to tease. She figured he must be fine with being some kind of super genius, but the subject quieted him. She tried again.

"Tell me about your sister. Are you close?"

"I thought I told *you* to talk." But he answered anyway. "Yeah. We always have been. Even though I've lived pretty far away, Maggie and I keep up." His chest expanded, and she could sense his silent pride. "She's a great girl. Smart and funny."

She knew that instant that she was going to ask. She waited a couple of heartbeats to get her courage up, gauging the distance between where they were, passing between two spindly trees, and the barn, a couple of dozen yards ahead. Deciding it was short enough to walk if she had to, Margo took the plunge.

"Could you do me a favor...please?"

"What?"

"Tell me the truth: Why don't you like me?"

"Wh—"

"I understand you wouldn't be thrilled that you have to...be so close to me, but you seemed to get pretty pissed about the room, and eating dinner with me. Like, overly. So, is it something about me? It doesn't make any sense unless it's that. Or...I don't know...you've got a girlfriend?" She blushed as she said it. "I feel like we get along well right now. Is there a reason why we can't be...friendlier?"

Her words hung in the muggy air, and the only thing Margo could hear over the pounding of her heart was Gamma's hooves thumping against the grass. She leaned slightly forward; her head throbbed, distracting from the suspense of his answer.

She needed it quick, like snatching off a Band-Aid, but Logan just sat there...like a mannequin. Just as she opened her mouth to say, *forget about it*, he took a deep breath.

"So...um, what was the question again?"

She shut her eyes, and kept her own voice dead neutral. His arm around her waist had gone to stone. "The question was, what did I do to make you dislike me?"

She felt him nod, and she thought her head might explode. "You didn't do anything to make me dislike you, and I don't."

"Then what was up with the room, or that dinner on the porch, and you avoiding me the last two days. *And* you refused to show me around the barn. Refused rudely. Or maybe I imagined all those things?"

"No," he answered. "No."

"Okay..." She waited, gripping the saddle horn. "So it's true—you have been acting weird to me. Like, friendly at first, and now, and rude at all the other times. Is it because you have a girlfriend?"

Logan laughed at that. He seemed to think it was *hiilarious*.

"Is that a confirmation," she asked, "or a denial?"

Another laugh. "A denial," he said. "Most definitely."

She didn't know whether to grin or punch him. As it was, she'd gone all warm and soft again. "You know what?" She glanced back at him. "You're weird. Maybe it's a good thing you don't like me, because it means I'm normal."

She could feel him smile. Then shrug. "Maybe."

“Aaa-hah.” She turned, even though it hurt her neck, and poked him. “So you *do* dislike me.”

And it was funny, because at that moment, she felt herself starting to float.

Logan must have been floating, too, because he laughed a lot more.

And then she laughed. It hurt her head. She said, “Crap,” and then he said, “What?”

“You don’t like me,” she said, oddly confident now. “Just admit it. Is it cooties, or did Jana mention that deadly disease I picked up? I knew I shouldn’t have traveled to that slum in Calcutta, but geez, those orphans were so cute.”

“They must have been.”

“Worth the virus. And the mandatory quarantine. And the loss of a potential friend named Logan. Who doesn’t want to room with me because I have cooties. The really fatal kind.”

“Are they?” he asked quietly. She could feel the sudden tension in him, in his chest and stomach and arms. The unhappiness.

Looking down at his hand, Margo had the strongest urge to wrap her own around it. Instead, she stared out toward the barn.

Logan felt sick as he listened to the Jeep crunch up the gravel path behind him. He saw Margo in his head—the way she looked buckled into the front seat: pale and smiling, just a little, lifting her hand to wave goodbye. She'd taken all the blame for the accident, telling Jana she'd come right into the stables and saddled Apollo without consulting anyone.

"He was so pretty," she'd said, a little wistfully. Logan hadn't said a word. He couldn't confess what he couldn't stand to think about: It was his fault she'd gotten hurt, his fault she was riding to the Isis Clinic for a MRI.

He began to unsaddle Gama, then realized he would need to ride to find Apollo. He turned back to the door, but his vision swam. Everything became a blur, and he lashed out, throwing his fist at the stall. The impact hurt, and Logan liked the way it felt. He slid down to his knees and tucked his arm to his chest, able to breathe for the first time in an hour. In the rhythm of panting, he shut his eyes.

He and Maggie were swinging on that old swing set—the one in the back with the candy-cane stripes and the baby chair that they were both too big for but always tried to fit into anyway. Logan was explaining the stars.

He was learning about them in his special Friday afternoon class, and about the planets, too. It was almost time for supper, and after that, he was going to take Maggie into the fields. The corn was getting tall, and they could lay between the stalks and watch it get dark without being seen.

Sometimes you could see Jupiter and Mars, and he really liked that. He liked the idea of going to a planet. He would be the only one up there, unless he wanted to bring anyone with him. Sometimes he thought maybe he might bring Maggie, when she wasn't being a brat. He would probably bring his mom. And that was it. Just the three of them.

Right then, his mom stuck her head out the back door and called them in for supper. Logan was swinging really high, so he hit the pole with his tip-toes to slow himself down. If they were late for supper, his dad would get mad.

When he was close to the ground, he jumped off and turned around to Maggie. "Come on."

Her pink lips puckered up.

"I said let's go!"

She shook her head. "Nu-uh."

"Do you want Daddy to get mad?"

"No." Maggie used her baby voice, the one she always used when something had upset her, even though she was three and she knew how to talk for real.

"Then come on." He grabbed her swing chain. She shrieked as it wobbled and threw her arms out. Logan caught her, and she wrapped her legs around his waist, putting her head on his shoulder.

He tried to wiggle free, but she was locked on like a cicada shell on a tree. "Come on, let go of me."

"I don't wanna go."

Eventually Logan got her inside, but it wasn't easy. Maggie was what Logan's mom called stubborn as a mule. Logan had to promise her the last of his fudge popsicles to get her to go in. He had also told her things would be okay, and he felt bad when they got to the kitchen, because they weren't. His dad looked really mad, and he was already drinking out of his special cup.

Logan didn't tell anybody, but he thought his dad was a little bit scary. He was big, even compared to other adults, and his face was always frowning.

When he came in for supper, he was dirty from working on Mr. Taylor—no, *Mrs.* Taylor's

planes. Mr. Taylor had died just a few months before, after a rattler bit him by a cotton gin.

Logan got some mashed potatoes and fried steak. He even got green beans, to make his dad more happy. He helped Maggie get her food, because his mom was already sitting down.

“You two’re late,” Orry Tripp growled.

Logan was almost to the table, but he stopped. His dad’s voice sounded slow and sleepy, but there was an edge to it.

“Come on. Sit down!”

Logan’s mom was sitting across from his dad, so Logan had to sit beside him. And so did Maggie. She must have noticed his funny talking and his extra mean face, because she scooted her chair near their mom’s.

Logan’s dad hit the table. “Sarah,”—that was Logan’s mom—“you don’t need to be cutting up her food any more. She’s almost four years old.”

Maggie was just barely three, but Logan didn’t say so.

His mom scooted Maggie’s seat back to its place and tried to tell her how to cut her own food, but Maggie couldn’t do it. Logan leaned across the table to help her, and his dad swatted his arm.

“Get back over there!”

“Can I eat wit my hands?” Maggie asked.

“No! You ain’t an animal!”

Logan never said anything to his father unless he had to, and he never disagreed with the man. But for some reason, he did that night. It was just a mumble—he backed out before he could really say the words—but his father demanded he speak up.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Sounds like you’ve got somethin’ to say.”

Logan moved his beans around with the tip of his fork.

“Say it again, boy!”

His heart thumped as he met his father’s eyes. They were red and kind of watery. “I said, we’re sorta like animals. Like the deer.”

For some reason, Logan’s dad laughed—loud. It hurt Logan’s ears and made his mom frown. When he was done laughing, Logan’s dad said, “How’s that, son? Tell me how we’re like animals.”

“Um. Well we both have eyes. And legs and hearts. And Ms. Suffolk said we used to have tails.”

That got an even bigger laugh. Logan’s dad laughed so loud that he spilled his drink, and he made Logan pour him more from the frozen glass bottle he kept in the freezer.

While Logan was getting the drink, his mom and his dad started fighting. About him. Logan couldn’t hear them well, but he heard his mom say his name, and he heard his dad say something about *sin*.

Logan stopped by his dad’s chair and held out the drink, and his dad snatched it. Logan flinched a little, and his dad laughed at that, too. But it wasn’t a real laugh.

He fixed his red eyes on Logan’s mom. “Sarah, I need to start teaching this boy to be a man. He needs to start learning the shop. That’s where a boy should be. Not readin’ stories.” Logan’s dad laughed, low and scratchy. “I’ll show you some stories, son. Down at Finnigan’s Store. They’ve got pictures, too.”

For some reason, the mention of pictures made Logan’s mom really mad.

He tried to figure out why, but his parents seemed to be talking without sound. After a few more minutes, his mom got up and shoved her chair in. She took her plate and put it in the sink and got Maggie’s plate and tugged Maggie with her down the hall.

As they were going, she turned around. Her face was red. “Just because Hank’s dead doesn’t

mean you can act like this!"

"I'll do whatever the hell I well want!"

"Don't curse in front of the children!"

Logan's dad knocked him on the shoulder, a stinging slap that made him slide to the edge of his chair. "This one's nine years old!"

His mom left after that, and Logan's stomach felt like it was falling. He tried to eat, but it was hard to swallow. After what felt like ages, he finished up his beans and asked to be excused.

His dad didn't answer. He was still eyeing the hall.

"Dad. Um, can I be excused?"

His father waved at him. He was hunched over, shoveling mashed potatoes into his mouth and breathing like the cows did when they had calves.

Logan hurried washing his plate because he wanted to get outside fast. He headed for the den, walking right by his dad's chair instead of going around the table's other end, so his dad wouldn't notice he was scared.

He held his breath until his hand touched the doorknob. Hallelujah! He was almost out. Almost free. And then, just as he started to turn it, something snatched his upper arm.

Logan's feet left the floor as he was wheeled around to face his father. The elder Tripp seemed as big and angry as a bull.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Logan swallowed. "T-to the fields."

"What are you gonna do in the fields?"

"Um...nothing."

Logan's dad leaned in closer. "Speak up. I can't hear you."

"Nothing."

"I'll ask you again: what you gonna do in the fields?"

"Just...look around."

That mean face came closer. Logan could smell that bad smell on his breath. "Look me in the eye, son."

Logan did.

"Didn't I always tell you to look me in the eye?"

"Y-y- I mean," he inhaled, "yes."

"No more going outside at night. There's rattlers out there. No more going outside, you hear me?"

Logan heard, but he had to go out. His chest felt really tight just thinking about staying in. "Dad, I'll bring my flashlight! And stay on the porch! I need to see the stars for my class."

"I said no!"

"But my teacher—"

"Miss Suffolk," his dad sneered. "I don't care what that uppity bitch says! You think 'cause you're in some special smart-ass class you can do whatever you want to?" Big fingers caught his hair and yanked it back. "Let me *tell* you something, son, look me in the eye, right now! This is my house. *My* house. Doesn't matter what Miss Taylor thinks. And a man's in charge of his own goddamned house! He says who does what, and I say you're staying in! You're staying in here, and in the daytime you're coming with me to the shop!"

"No!" Logan jerked away. "I don't want to go with you!"

That hard hand struck like a cobra on his cheek, then it jerked him so close their noses almost touched. "You'll do whatever I say. Whatever. I. Say. And I say you're staying inside. You're gonna sit on that couch over there and... No." He shook his head. "You know what, you go out there on the porch like you want to. Sit in that rocker and wait for me."

Fear quickened Logan's heart and he barely managed to open the door as his father stormed off toward his parents' room. He stood frozen by the porch lamp, surrounded by moths and mosquitoes. His throat felt full, and he wondered if he might puke up his supper.

Logan still wasn't sure why he did what he did next. Why he didn't just stand there and take what was coming.

But he couldn't. The second the door opened, he shot off like a comet, streaking down the steps and through the yard before his father even saw him run.

He ran faster than he'd ever run before. To him, it seemed faster than the horses. He ran into the cornfield and started to fly.

His father was clumsy and heavier, and he didn't know the fields like Logan did. But his legs were longer.

Somewhere near the big pecan trees that split up the peanuts from the corn, Orry Tripp caught his son. Logan tried to pull ahead, but his lungs ached and his muscles shook, and he couldn't go any faster.

His father brought him down like a linebacker, smashing his breath out as he hit the hard red dirt. He couldn't move at all. He couldn't yell. He couldn't even breathe.

The first blow, to his jaw, hurt like sin, and the next one busted his lip open, but it got better after that. He looked up at the sky and picked the brightest star, and he imagined himself up there, drifting toward the star which he realized was red, red like the blood oozing out his fist right now, because it hadn't been a star at all.

Mars.

He'd gotten off the farm. The summer after fifth grade, he'd finally outrun Orry Tripp's long arm. To Milton, then MIT, but always he was looking up at the sky. Through the panic attacks, nightmares, guilt and loneliness, his one companion had been the red planet. He'd close his eyes, and see himself in the stars.

When he closed his eyes this time, all he saw was Margo.

Four hours and twenty-something minutes later, Margo curled her knees to her chest and tugged the duvet closer to her chin. The ice-filled baggie lying awkwardly over her head shifted, sending half-moon ice cubes sliding over her ear, where they liked to pool and melt.

Below the ice, her left iPod earbud whispered some crap Evan Timberdime uploaded under the name “Relaxing Bach.” The songs were titled one, two, three, and so forth, so Margo had no idea what she was hearing. Not that she cared. She was only listening to the iPod so she didn’t have to listen to Jana. The O’s manager was in the hallway, cursing violently into her cell phone.

Margo would’ve been listening to music with actual words, but real music hurt her head. She had a concussion—the mildest grade, apparently, but mild was plenty, thanks. The pain was concentrated over her left ear, and the bone-deep sting made it difficult to think. Which was all she’d been doing for the past two hours, as she lay in this room—a guest room on the first floor of the casa, which Jana had taken from a visiting Nobel laureate in physics because she thought Margo couldn’t handle stairs.

All Margo had thought about was Logan.

Analyzed him, really, and their every interaction—knowing that this was obviously more than professional interest.

Margo had even called Elizabeth after she’d returned from the island’s tiny clinic.

“I can tell you two things from right here.” Right here was the deck of a yacht in some bay in Monaco. Margo could hear seagulls cawing—cawing *painfully*—in the background. “First, this guy sounds like a giant nerd. I can’t believe he’s all that cute; nature isn’t that nice to anybody. And second, you obviously like him.”

“Does he like you back?” Elizabeth mused before they hung up. “My crystal ball says ‘very likely.’”

“Very likely.” Margo was less certain, but a small part of her—okay, a large, insane part of her—wanted to agree.

She heard Jana’s voice peak, and paused her song. The manager’s twins were sick, and Margo worried something had happened. But no: Jana sounded pleased. Someone answered, a voice much softer than Jana’s. Jana responded, and Margo pulled the earbuds out.

A male voice. *His* voice? Jana said something else, and the voice responded. Jana’s voice picked up again, she was speaking loud and fast in Spanish, thanking someone—

Logan. He walked into the room, and all the blood drained from Margo’s head. He was holding an ice pack, wearing a white t-shirt that made his tan look almost fake in the dim light. When he noticed her staring, he tilted his head to the side, pressed his lips together, and walked over slowly, stiffly, like he was approaching an open casket.

He sat in the chair Jana had pulled close and draped the ice pack over his knee. He lifted his finger and pointed at her. “You have a bruise,” he said. “Right there.” He pointed to the skin under his eye.

The hand he pointed with was also bruised, and the skin on his knuckles was torn and scabbed.

“What happened to your hand?”

He jerked it down, looking almost...guilty.

“Apollo,” he told her.

“Oh, God. Did he hurt you when you caught him?”

“No. It happened earlier today.”

He was lying, for some reason. Both of his hands had been fine when she’d ridden with him.

"How's the headache?" he asked, wiping his palms on his jeans.

"They said it should go away soon."

His mouth twisted down, and he glanced over his shoulder, toward the hall. He looked like he wanted to get up, but something was stopping him.

"Did Jana leave?"

Logan nodded.

So he was her babysitter now. "That doesn't mean you have to stay. I'll be fine by myself." Margo lifted her head to prove it, refusing to wince when a burst of pain shot under her eye.

"No, no. I can stay." He held out the ice pack, obviously guilty. "I wanted to bring you this."

Sitting up was one thing, but grabbing and lifting a giant ice pack was another. Margo hesitated, and Logan leaned closer, slowly reaching out to touch her cheek. His fingers felt like five flames on her cool skin. Before coherent thought returned, he had placed the pack over her temple.

His voice was a rumble, making her belly clench. "I can feel the knot."

"You can?" She swallowed, because he was very close.

And then he wasn't. He leaned away, set the ice pack on her sheets, and shifted back down to his chair.

Margo ran her fingers over the chilly plastic.

"So..." Logan drummed his fingers on his knee. "You getting bored yet?"

"Yes." She nodded, a little too hard. "The only music that doesn't hurt my head is Bach. Bleh."

"No fugues for you?"

"It's boring."

Logan smiled, and his teeth were very white. "What do you prefer?"

"Stuff with words." Then she wondered how stupid she sounded.

"Stuff with words," he echoed softly.

"Yeah." Margo shifted her weight again, propping her cheek in her palm, though it hurt her neck. "TV hurts my eyes, and they told me not to go to sleep, so..."

He lifted up a hardback picture book from the table beside her, started thumbing through it. "I think this is it." He held it up, and she recognized her mother's Bel Air home. "*American Palaces*—the book." He winked.

Margo looked down at the puffy peach and white duvet. "It seems like I'll never go back out to California."

"Really?"

The word was so soft, and the way he looked at her, so nice, that she blushed again. "Yeah," she said, embarrassed for being so open. "It's okay, though. I've thought of going to school at Stanford or something."

"Oh yeah?"

"I think I would like it there." She chewed her lip, trying to think of why. "It's just big enough. You could be anyone."

"So you want to be someone else?"

He had his head in his hand; she could practically envision glasses on the tip of his nose. "Are you trying to psychoanalyze me?"

"If you'll just lie down flat and close your eyes..."

"You'll tell me how I feel."

His brow arched. "Touché..."

Margo grinned. "Actually, I'm a fan of that kind of thing."

"Shrinks?"

"Psychology," she said.

“Stanford does that well.”

“I know.”

“You know,” he murmured, “I think Freud said there are no accidents.”

“None at all?” She wondered what that meant for her. First, she’d undressed without locking the door. Then she’d saddled a wild horse and gotten herself thrown off. “Based on that, maybe I should be in therapy.”

He smiled. “Maybe.” She opened her mouth for an indignant retort, but he quickly said, “Kidding. I’m kidding. I don’t think things are really that cohesive.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged again. “You know...everything connected. For a reason. I say maybe there are accidents. Shit just happens.”

He reached out and grabbed the ice pack, stood slowly over her, and settled it on her bruise. He was silent for a moment, staring down at her, while Margo’s heart beat uncomfortably hard.

“Tell me something: can you walk?”

She nodded.

“Then come with me up to the O. I want to show you something.”

“I don’t know....”

Logan stuck out his hand. “Come on. No one’s up there right now. And you have four more hours until you can fall asleep. This will be better than your iPod. Promise.”

Margo hesitated, then peeled back her covers. His hand was warm and firm, with calluses on palm and fingers. As he led her out the room and down the hall, he exerted the slightest bit of pressure. *Follow*: an urging. Not an order.

By the time they made it to the sixth floor of the observatory tower, her heart was pumping twice as hard as normal, and she felt it in her head. They stopped at a tall steel door, and Logan pulled a card out of his pocket, swiped.

The room he led her into looked like a geek’s heaven. Dozens of rows of computers were tricked out with all kinds of little gadgets: cameras, printers, digital writing pads, touch pads, speakers. One computer near the room’s opposite end linked up to a movie theater-size screen, connected to dozens of little tubes that fed into the ceiling.

“That’s my desk,” Logan said. “Big screen for the important folks.”

“Big heads, big screens.”

He laughed. “I don’t actually have a desk. No one does.”

She held a hand to her chest. “You mean you have to... *share*.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

She glanced around the room again, and then up. “Why is the ceiling flat,” she asked, pointing, “instead of round.”

“You’re about to find out.”

Logan steered her toward the back of the room, where a winding staircase disappeared into the ceiling, and she said, “I don’t know if I can handle any stairs.”

“Relax,” he whispered. Then he picked her up.

Seriously. He actually swept her off her feet, and carried her up the stairs like she didn’t weigh a thing. When they reached the top, he set her down gently, holding her waist.

“Got it?” His voice was husky.

“Yeah. I think.”

She felt weak and shaky from the ride, and every nerve in her body had zeroed on her waist, on the spots where his fingers touched her body, too tight to be casual. He let her go, but she was still standing body-heat close to him, so her senses were overwhelmed by his warmth and his scent:

wintery with a touch of something sweet, like honey.

She took a little step away, and then her eyes adjusted, and her mouth fell open.

“Wow...”

They stood inside a dome that resembled a giant, circular tic-tac-toe board. Pipe-like bars folded into diamonds crisscrossed the ceiling, and a flap near the front of the dome gleamed golden brass, winking in the faint mechanical light of several massive, cannon-like machines that must have been cameras.

“This,” Logan said, sweeping his hand out at them, “is the real observatory. And those—” he nodded at the big, bulb-like things on the end of what looked like cannon chutes— “are the telescopes.”

They were pointed toward the dome’s top. Margo noticed patterns cut into the ceiling; flaps where it opened. “Cindy designed them,” she murmured.

“Zhuscopes.”

Margo had heard all about her mother’s special telescope, and had wondered about the name. Casa de Zhu, the Zhuscope, *Zhu’s*. How arrogant could you get? Logan’s arm bumped hers, and her temper instantly cooled.

“Come over here and sit with me.” She followed him past a couple of desks to a long, couch-like thing she couldn’t really see in the dark. It was positioned just in front of the massive machines. Margo sat down tentatively, eyeing the rubber-looking floor, inhaling the funny scent of metal and plastic. He sank down beside her, and dropped a pair of goggles in her hand.

Her fingers explored the plastic, finding that they fastened via a strap; it would be too tight for her hurt head.

“Lean back against the couch,” he told her. “I can hold them up for you.”

“You don’t have to do that. I can hold them.” She suddenly felt shy, overexposed.

“You’ll need your hands for something else.”

He leaned away, then in, and dropped a small, smooth cube into her lap. She rubbed her fingertips over its rounded keys, and the thing beeped. Logan lunged, a second late. The ceiling was starting to vibrate. Its wide, segmented pieces shuddered and slid, descending slowly toward the floor. The dome’s walls continued to fold in, not loudly, but in bursts of cool, smooth air that tossed her hair around her cheeks. The walls slid down into the floor until the sky surrounded them. A warm breeze kissed her skin. Stars sparkled, billions of white pinpricks.

Logan’s hand touched down on her knee.

“This is it...”

The air on the hilltop was wet and carried a thousand scents: pine sap, moist dirt, salt water. Her senses hummed as the crickets sang and frogs croaked. They were sitting up high; she could see the distant lights of Puerto Rico, a smear of gold amid a sheet of flattened black. And closer to her, tools to see the sky.

When the dome was all gone, all that remained were pistons, sheets of mirror, and at the heart of it all, a giant lens.

Logan snorted. “I thought that you might like to come up here. I guess Bach is more relaxing, huh?”

“Yes,” she whispered, turning to him. “But this is incredible.”

There was a little awkward moment, where she thought he seemed embarrassed. That or he thought she was cheesy and obvious. Then he bumped her shoulder with his, and the coziness fell back over them.

“With this thing,” he said, taking the remote in her lap, “you can guide the telescope. It’s already set, so you just have to put on the glasses. The old way would be looking through those lenses there,”

he said, pointing to the ends of what looked, to her, like pistons.

“Your— Cindy invented these things,” he said, holding out the glasses. “The telescope sends the signal to them, so you can see everything from here. Most of us who work here stick to the old school way, but this gets grants. And,” he smiled, “it works well for the concussed. Wanna try?”

“Absolutely.” Anything.

“Sit back,” he told her. “I’ll get up and stand behind you. I can hold the goggles up and you can —”

“That’s okay,” she blurted, desperate to keep him next to her. “I really can hold them myself. You can just steer this thing,” she told him, holding up the little box. “I trust you.”

Logan wanted to warn her that her trust was misplaced, that whatever she thought this meant, it probably meant more but would be worth less, but she was smiling.

He'd told himself he could treat her like a friend, and for some reason, he'd actually believed it. The truth was, every second near her worked on him like Southern Comfort, heat gliding over him, tightening his stomach and clouding his mind, drawing his hands to her, until it seemed fine to touch her, linger. He could tell himself he was being nice, offering to stand behind the couch, so close that his chest brushed her back, his arms rested on her shoulders, her hair tickled his cheeks and tortured his nose, all so he could hold up some goggles.

It was ridiculous. Asinine. Selfish and at the same time, completely stupid.

He'd wanted to get off the planet since he was old enough to think. He'd worked tirelessly for the last decade to get to where he was. He was smart, sure, but he'd still worked his ass off to choose the right courses, impress the right people, and now that he was close—*so* close—he was preying on Cindy Zhu's daughter?

What was wrong with him? Was he so much like his father? So self-destructive?

Logan took a steadying breath and smiled at her, telling himself to keep his shit together.

"Sure. I'll steer you." ...*down onto the couch*. He gritted his teeth, and she seemed to notice.

"Or I can hold the controller, and you can do the goggles? It doesn't matter to me."

"Nah, this way is good."

He needed to get on with it. He could show her a couple of planets and take her back to the casa. Surely Jana would be finished putting the boys to sleep by then. He felt guilty abandoning Margo when she was hurt, but that was better than driving himself crazy. Or more importantly, better than engulfing her in his bullshit.

And there was a lot of it. Enough to fuel a space shuttle.

"Um..."

He blinked. She was watching him.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sorry."

He took the controller and she raised the goggles to her face. She shifted a little, and her shorts bunched up, revealing a dangerous amount of thigh.

"Oh my God." She took the mask off her face and grinned. "This is very cool."

"Good. I wanted to..." He shook his head. Shut his mouth. She smiled at him, an understanding smile, like she could tell he had lost his mind and she didn't mind being with him anyway. Logan felt a swell of guilt.

She squirmed on the couch, trying to get comfortable, and he leaned back, too, narrowing the space between them to inches, coming in close enough to get another whiff of her perfume.

"You can lean your head on me if the back of this thing is too high for you. It's not very comfortable. I should have grabbed a pillow."

Margo's heart missed a beat. Pillow. Logan. It was all she could do not to giggle like a lottery winner.

Okay, obviously time to accept the fact that she liked him.

But did he like her?

“Sit back. Kind of lean against my chest. Like that,” he said, encouragingly, as she snuggled between his shoulder and the couch.

“Are you sure?”

She could feel his low *mm-hmm* vibrating through his arm into hers.

It felt tense, the arm, and in a rush, she realized she was being stupid. He probably didn’t like this. He probably didn’t want to do it any more than he’d wanted to hold the goggles for her. Duh. He was just feeling guilty.

She wished she could go downstairs. Her head ached suddenly, a throb that soon burst like some kind of firework. She squeaked, and Logan was on her in an instant.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.” Her eyelids fluttered; his face was close enough to kiss; his hands squeezed lightly on her upper arms.

“Are you really?”

“Yes.” She leaned away from him, and he backed off.

“What happened?”

“It was just a little...burst. When I lifted up my arm. It felt kind of like when you hit your funny bone, but it went all the way up behind my ear.”

“Do you want to go downstairs?”

“No. Not at all. ...Unless you want to.”

He shook his head, then lifted the goggles from her lap. She tried to stay still as he came in close to her side, so close they were pressed together tight.

His warm, rough voice was right next to her ear. “You should see some stars now.”

Margo gasped when the night sky lit up before her like a high-definition movie. She almost dropped the box, and then his voice was in her ear, just a whisper, raspy, warm. “Find the button that’s shaped like an ‘X’.”

“Okay.”

“Press that, and I’ll give you a tour.”

“A tour of the sky...”

“We’ll start at the sun first. This isn’t real time, obviously. It’s a picture I took earlier.”

Margo squinted, nervous about the light, but the image that came up was liquid brown.

“If you’re wondering why it isn’t bright, I put up a filter. At its full light, it’d blind anybody, even from the ground, but for you it needs to be extra dark.”

For *her*. Margo’s heart tapped its toes.

“See those paler spots, coming up kind of like arches? Those are solar flares. That’s something we look at here. Press the button when you’re ready.”

The sun looked like it had freckles. This pleased Margo. She pressed the X, and they moved to Mercury.

“We don’t know much about this one. Nobody’s really looked at the surface. They did some stuff in the seventies, but only for about a year. It’s not quite as interesting as Venus.”

He was quiet while she studied the images, big, bold things in dampened Technicolor. Mercury was grayish purple, almost like the moon without its holes.

“Venus is the third-brightest thing in the sky. Most people think it’s a star...” Up close, it looked like a bowl of tomato soup with milk swirled in.

Mars was incredible, rusty smooth. Logan’s tone changed when he talked about that. He spoke faster, lighter, his hands in her hair moving slightly, so he tickled her temples.

“If there was going to be life somewhere in our solar system, it would probably be on Mars.”

“And you’re going to find it one day, right?”

He chuckled, liquid velvet. “Not me. I’ll be lucky if I get to go. But I’d like to help. And, hey, if I found it, I’m not complaining.”

“You should name it Marge.”

“Is that your nickname?”

“Yep.” She smiled, and he made a sort of thinking sound, like maybe he’d consider it. She wished...

Onto the asteroid belt, and Ceres. His voice was relaxing, hypnotic. Somewhere out near the Kupiter belt, she noticed that she was totally slumped against his chest. He noticed too.

“Are you tired? I’m probably boring you to sleep.”

“No,” she said. “I like this kind of stuff. It just seems so cliché.” His hands, over her ears, moved a bit, and she worried he was going to take down the goggles. When he didn’t, she went on, baffled by the way things just flowed out of her. “You know the whole thing about nature versus nurture?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Well, I’ve always liked to go with nurture. Like, how you turn out is about more than just who your parents were.”

He chuckled. “Amen to that.”

“Anyway, when I realized it’s not true—not entirely true—because some biology comes in, like DNA and stuff—it makes me kind of... I don’t know. It’s just weird. I mean, I don’t even know her.”

His left hand tensed, holding the goggles while his right arm lowered. She held her breath as it slid around her waist. For the longest moment, they just sat there. She could feel his ribs press into hers. Finally, so quietly she could barely hear him he said, “My dad thinks reading is a waste of time.”

Margo laughed; it was choked off when his hand landed near her hip.

“Let’s go somewhere else... somewhere out into the Milky Way. Maybe about eighteen-thousand light years away. You’re not getting dizzy, are you?” The stars were sliding by, little lines of pearl.

“I’m... good.”

She could feel him breathing, hard chest going in and out. His arm around her waist was solid. Warm. He shifted, pulling her closer, so her back was flush with his chest, his chin almost resting on her shoulder.

Figuring his hand must be getting tired of holding the goggles, she raised her right hand and grabbed the other side. The things trembled—her or him?

She saw a picture that reminded her of Earth’s solar system, but with some shapes she didn’t recognize.

“This is just a prototype,” he murmured. “Press the circle key, you can zoom in. I’ll show you something you might like.”

She did, and a smeary picture moved mechanically in front of her.

“It’s just a couple of pixels, but you see the color variation on the edges of that little dot?”

“Yes.”

“You’re looking at a little slice of reality I like to call The Great Planet Marge. Discovered just a few weeks ago, it’s been confirmed by telescopes at some of the world’s lesser observatories. Its name will be changing from a long meaningless number to the name of discoverer’s choice sometime in the next few days.”

Despite her focus on the blob, and the way her head still hurt, Margo whirled around, desperate to see if he was kidding. Logan grinned, and she slapped him lightly on the shoulder. “Don’t mess with me.”

“I’m not.” He raised both hands in mock surrender. “I would have thought you’d be happy to be the namesake for such a...cool place.” He grinned at her, laughing at his corniness. “There could be

ice on Planet Marge—and ice could mean water, which could mean life. You could be the prototype for billions of other little Margos.”

“Or other big Margos, intent on gobbling up earthlings.” Margo laughed.

“They’ll be studied for their...unusual qualities.”

Margo froze as the pad of his finger found her temples— “...For their very pretty brown eyes.”—and lost her breath as his rough palm spread out around the curve of her jaw. “...and for their soft skin.”

As his hands stroked up, into her hair, she knew that Logan was going to kiss her. His face came close to hers; she could smell the mint of his breath. “I think what they’ll be best known for is their hair. Envy of all the other aliens that orbit their same star.”

As his eyes sparked, Margo reached out and caught the back of his neck. An instant later, his mouth covered hers.

Whoa.

He was soft and hot, like liquid silk. She opened her mouth, and his tongue glided in. She melted as his arm circled her shoulders, burned as her tongue met his; she trembled as she licked inside of his mouth. The taste of him, warm mint, and the scent—just Logan, making her head spin. His hand caressed her neck, fingers inching up her shivering nape. His mouth stroked and tugged, always gentle, slow and easy, until her heart had slipped down to her toes and she found herself floating off the couch.

When he pulled back, she was panting.

“I’m sorry.” He dropped his face into his hand, and she could hear his ragged breaths. “I’m sorry,” he said again. His head lifted. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“You didn’t.”

“We should probably go.” He stood.

“Was it bad?” It was stupid to ask, but she couldn’t help it. She watched him drag his hand over his face.

“No,” he said, finally. “Wasn’t bad.”

She took his hand and stood. His fingers curled over hers for just a second, then slipped away.

“I had a nice night,” she said quickly.

“Thanks for coming.”

That was it? He seemed so cold now. Almost angry.

“Logan, did I... I mean, do you regret that...”

“No. But you should go.”

She did.

Logan turned his phone off and slammed it into his fist. He wanted to chunk it off the balcony, but his logical side won. Doing so would be counterproductive. It was his only phone, and since it was the middle of the afternoon and he was outside the fourth floor of the O, someone could see him do it.

Pushing his hand through his hair, he sucked a deep breath and remembered the hitches in his sister's voice.

"Logan, I'm at the hospital. Mama stumped her toe and she broke it. Nothing really happened... She was trying to help Daddy get to their bedroom, and...I don't know. She's clumsy I guess." That was the spot where Maggie's voice had reached up—because that was the lie.

He actually needed to talk to his sister to find out what really happened, and he knew she was the only person he *might* get it straight from. There was no sense calling his mother. He wouldn't get anything out of her.

Did he need to go home? His stomach dropped, and he felt a pressure on his lungs. The thought of going home always made him feel like he was suffocating.

Going home...

Logan heard the door open from the room behind him. He quickly dumped his phone into his pocket and turned into the room.

Margo was staring up at him.

Great. Just what I need.

She looked gorgeous in a slinky pink sundress, with her hair pulled up in some kind of little flower pin. Her color was good, her cheeks just a touch pink. Her eyes were alert and anxious, her mouth pinched. She was upset—with him.

No shit, with him. Had he really kissed her last night? It still seemed surreal, but yes, he had.

God, he was such a fucking idiot. To have indulged his little crush, to have let it grow into something so large, so ensnaring.

Margo opened her mouth, like she was eager to speak. Then her hands fluttered to below her chest. She smoothed her dress.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi to you." His voice sounded reedy, so Logan swallowed.

"What have you been doing?" Her brown eyes flared with hurt. *Why haven't you checked on me?* Why, indeed.

He shrugged, then rubbed his eyes, because he needed something to do with his hands. "I've just been working... Long day today." If that wasn't an excuse, he'd never heard one. "What about you?"

"Not much." She shrugged. "Read some. Sat by the pool. I was surprised I didn't see you down at the stables."

Another shrug. "I was in the fields." *Hiding from you.* "How do you feel?"

She smiled—forced. "I'm okay." Her tone was light. "My head still hurts a little, but overall, I think it's fine."

She was wearing eye shadow. It twinkled like stardust in the glow of his desk lamp. He wanted badly to grab her, to crush her body against his until he didn't know anything but her.

When he didn't reply, she said, "All right then." She started to turn and he folded.

"Hey...wait."

She spun around, and the hope on her face was almost more than he could stand. *Asshole.* That's

what he was. Nothing but a total, first-rate asshole.

“Feel better,” he told her, then tacked on: “My work here...it comes first. I’d like to have more fun, hang out with you, but...”

He stepped back, hands flipping over, so he showed her his palms.

Nothing here...

“Anyway.”

“Yeah. Alright.”

The words fell off her tongue as she quickly left. He watched the big steel door slam shut.

The next day, Margo sat up in her bed and tossed the wooden cube across the room. It landed on the carpet near the rumpled bed that Logan had used for the last two days, while she had been in the casa. She decided to leave it there. Maybe Mr. Science could solve the puzzle for her. Wasn't that what he was good for? Science-y stuff. Scholarly pursuits. Prodigy-izing. She hoped so, because as far as she could tell, he was terrible with people.

Or maybe just with her.

Angry—at him, and at herself for lying around all day in a pity party—Margo hopped up and smoothed her khaki shorts. According to her winking hippo watch, which she'd clasped around the post of her bed—an announcement to Logan that she'd be returning to the room that night—it was almost time for dinner. She didn't feel like seeing anybody, so Margo swept her hair up in a ponytail and hurried down into the yard, planning to tiptoe into the casa and sneak into the kitchen to grab a few tasties from Oscar.

She didn't see the need to socialize anyway, since she'd decided to leave ASAP. She'd come hoping to get to know her mother, or to at least find out more about her, but now all of that seemed unimportant. Cindy wasn't around, and she wasn't going to be. Ever. Yes, the FBI or CIA or whomever had uncovered that pesky plot, but who's to say she was any safer on her mom's island? Wouldn't she be just as safe across the Atlantic with the Timberdimes?

Margo slipped into the casa and scampered down the now-familiar hall. The staff had been bustling around the house all day, cleaning like there was no tomorrow, and now every painting was razor-straight and every nook dust free. It was dinner time (or breakfast, if you were with the Japanese team) and Margo could smell the thick, spicy scent of Oscar's cooking.

Her stomach growled, and she followed her nose down the hall. She had to pass the dining room to get to the kitchen, and she glanced in. What she saw beside the bar stopped her like a brick wall.

There, suntanned and utterly resplendent in a pale blue Polo, was Logan. And beside him, in a forest green pantsuit that shimmered like steel armor, was Margo's mother. Talking. Laughing. With Logan.

Margo stared, frozen, as Cindy clapped Logan's shoulder. His smile was wider than his face, until he glanced up. His gaze hit Margo and she watched the grin wither. He raised his free hand with cold purpose. His finger extended, each tendon straining toward her.

Oh so slowly, like she was some slasher-movie villain, Cindy turned, and before Margo could bolt, her hand was waving. She strode over confidently, obviously not even a fraction as terrified as Margo. Logan was beside her, all smiles until he reached Margo first. She had a moment to register his unhappy frown, and then her mother was there.

Though several inches shorter than Margo's five-foot-three, the woman loomed, everything about her shouting *power!* Her hair was jet black, her lipstick bright red, her straight teeth unnaturally white. Her ivory skin looked like flawless pearl silk. Diamonds the size of nickels gleamed in her small ears.

Cindy and Logan spoke at once, losing Margo in the timbres of their voices. Her body reacted instinctively: heart rate peaking, lungs constricting, cheeks flushing while her hands and feet went ice-cube cold. Though she tried to fight it, panic swallowed her.

Then Logan touched her wrist. The motion was quick—he rubbed his finger over the sensitive skin inside—and the shock of it jolted her out of freak-out mode. She could see concern in his gaze, understanding, and then it was over. Margo looked into Cindy's wide cat face, nodding as her mother

said something about having concussions.

Her voice was Americanized, the hard, punchy words elongated some, but still she sounded angry. Sharp. Was that because she was speaking to Margo, or was that the way she always sounded? She tried to remember from the show.

“...And Jana told me that Logan rode to your rescue?”

Cindy sounded amused. She was looking at Logan, so it didn't really matter that Margo nodded, but she did. “He was great,” she heard herself say.

“That isn't true.” Logan ran a hand through his hair, and Cindy watched him move, her hawk-black eyes omniscient, like the piercing Zhuscope.

Margo wanted to step away, to escape the heat of her mother's body, to rid her nose of the now-familiar scent of gardenia lotion. She wanted to run, but she stood transfixed, studying the slightly square shape of Cindy's red nails, looking for pores on her smooth skin, absorbing the texture of her bowl-cut black hair—so much thicker than Margo's own.

“You are too modest, Logan,” Cindy said. She turned to Margo. “I thought your father paid for riding lessons. Shouldn't you know never to saddle an unfamiliar horse?”

She smiled as she asked it, but her voice rose slightly at the end. *That was stupid, daughter.* Disapproval.

Margo nodded mutely while her mind spun in circles, testing out thoughts, trying on emotions. How did she feel? What should she say? Things were firing inside her so fast, she couldn't sense her way ahead. She just opened her mouth.

“I should have known. He was just so pretty... I thought I could handle him.”

Some part of her—a part that was trying desperately to impress—thought her mother would be complimented. For all that she didn't know about Chinese culture, she always saw horses in their art, so she assumed a pretty horse would be a good thing.

Instead, Cindy's tundra face scrunched. “Apollo?” She tossed her head and laughed. “He is a rescue horse.”

“I'm sorry?”

“A rescue horse.”

“Apollo *rescues* people?”

Cindy's black eyes widened and her brows arched, the expression saying, *moron*. “I rescued *him*,” she said firmly, and so loudly it seemed she wanted the entire kitchen to hear. “Someone could not take care of him. I bought him, brought him here. A *rescue* horse.”

“Oh. I've got it now.” Margo tried a smile, but Cindy's brows remained skeptically arched.

She glanced at Logan—actually looked to him for help—but his face was blank. He'd taken a half step back, probably wanting to distance himself from her failure.

“So...um, when did you get here?” she asked, when it became clear that no one else was going to talk. Her voice sounded high, and it shook slightly.

“I arrived this afternoon.”

Margo ran her fingers over the hemline of her shorts. “Did you have good flight?”

“It was a busy flight. Lots of work to do.”

“How's that going? Your work,” she finished, the word hanging.

“Work is work.” Cindy shrugged. “And what have you done here?”

It was spoken like a challenge. Margo panicked. Directing her gaze away from Logan, who knew the true answer to that question, she fumbled for a lie. “All I've really done is lay out and read *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking.”

By Stephen Hawking? Of course it was written by Stephen Hawking!

Cindy nodded, her short black hair bouncing slightly.

Logan picked that moment to step in. “How was your time in Zurich?” he asked Cindy. “Were you able to work things out with Imatech?”

Margo watched more than listened to the two of them discuss Zurich—she had no idea what they were talking about—and then the planets Logan had found, and what properties they may or may not have. She’d tried to bait her mother by mentioning Stephen Hawking—the truth was, Margo had only touched the book; it was still in its place in the casa library—but Cindy remained focused on Logan.

He seemed to thrive in her presence. He said the right things, smiled at the right times... His presentation was seamless, and he did it all while avoiding Margo’s eyes. It was almost impossible to believe that this turbo-charged phony was the same person who’d kissed her.

That Logan and this were polar opposites, and only one of them was real.

She distracted herself from the ache in her chest by wondering what her mother was doing here. Logan had mentioned something about July Fourth, but could it be a birthday celebration for her? It was ridiculous to even think it, but her birthday was July fifth. It was always possible—except it wasn’t.

Margo shook her head. *Time to stop being stupid.*

Logan wound up between her and her egg donor in the food line. When Margo burned her hands on the asparagus tongs, he snatched them away and tossed a few stalks on her plate. As they stepped out onto the deck, and he pulled out Cindy’s chair, then hers, Margo reminded herself again that she didn’t know him. What she knew was a figment of her imagination, a ghost she’d invented after falling off Apollo; invented because—let’s face it—she’d needed it.

They were joined at the table by a ruddy-cheeked African scientist, the balding Nobel laureate whose room Margo had occupied, and the Austrian man Margo had bumped into on the stairs. She was staring at the Austrian scientist—actually, noticing how intently he watched her—they were joined by a familiar red-haired man, a tall, fit suit who was introduced as Mr. Johnathon Graystone. Logan’s eyes snapped to Graystone, and Margo remembered who he was.

Another multi-billionaire, and her mother’s partner in the space business. No wonder Logan looked nervous. If he played his cards right over shrimp and rice, he might win a space helmet.

Margo started on her rice while conversation whirled like a hurricane.

So I told her we were clearly getting something there... Fabulous to hear that... Was impressed to learn about a little lodge... No, I don’t think so yet. She’s still a little timid... It came in last month, but we’re still waiting on the other half...I thought it was a good idea at the time, but you know how shifty the South American markets can be...

She looked up, between Cindy, who sat at the end of the table, to Margo’s right, and Logan, who was seated across from her, on Cindy’s other side. The screen door was just between their chairs. She wondered if she could make it out without attracting notice.

Figuring Logan would notice, if for no other reason but that he kept sending awkward glances her way, she focused on her rice until she thought she heard her name.

She looked up and bumped into Logan’s eyes. He stared, like he was trying to give her a message, and went on: “Marge was the mother of Zeus and the goddess of unknown fortunes.”

“Very fitting,” said the Austrian man, who flashed Margo a grin with his creepy teeth.

“Yes. Quite nice,” said Jonathon Graystone.

“You know, it sounds a bit like Ma, another ancient deity. I like it.” Cindy smiled at Logan.

He didn’t smile back. The conversation spun around them, but Margo didn’t hear a word of it.

He had named the planet after her... or else—*oh, God*—he had lied. Logan had told her he was naming it for her, but in reality, he had already named it for some goddess. And she had fallen for it.

Margo’s fork clattered on her dainty plate, and the conversation stopped. Lifting her eyes, she found the one face she knew, and murmured, “I’m sorry. I’m just...clumsy.”

In the long breath of silence, Logan's gaze held hers. Margo looked down to pick up her fork, glad to hide her face. He'd known what was going on; she'd seen it in his eyes. She had told him, without meaning to, just how she felt about their night together in the O. Now she wanted to die.

"You should not worry," said the Austrian. Luther was his name, she thought she'd heard. His pale blue eyes watched hers with sharp concern. "How are you feeling? After that fall? Are you disoriented?"

"I'm doing well," she lied.

His question prompted others. She answered mechanically. Sooner or later, someone asked how it happened. Once again, her gaze jerked to Logan. He blinked.

Swallowing hard, Margo said, "I jumped."

"You did what?" the Nobel laureate asked. It was unclear whether he was surprised or just hard of hearing. She leaned forward.

"I tried to jump the creek. I was near the bend by the landing strip, and I didn't slow down. I didn't realize my horse wasn't fully trained, so I thought we could make it." She shrugged. "He threw me."

That drew a host of oohs and aaahs, and Johnathon Graystone asked if she'd seen a doctor. "Yes," she replied, and she wondered if the man had traveled here with her mother. If so, Cindy obviously hadn't mentioned Margo's concussion.

Johnathon Graystone raised his wine glass. "May Margo's hard head serve her well."

Margo held up her water, too, but nearly choked trying to swallow. When she drew a good breath, Cindy caught her eye. "I believe it, about you being clumsy."

The comment seemed innocent enough, but Margo knew Cindy. Knew the television personality, anyway. On her finance show, *Zhu's*, which Margo had watched obsessively for a whole year, she'd learned that Cindy was bossy and cutting, shrewd and competent. If there was one thing she was not, it was clumsy.

To avoid her mother's lingering gaze, she glanced at Logan. He was chewing a shrimp, but when she looked over, his eyes dropped quickly to his plate. Cindy's gaze intercepted them. She looked from Margo to Logan, and said, "So... The two of you. You're about the same age. Do you share any interests?"

Logan's eyes widened just enough for Margo to notice. They were wary. When, after a millisecond, she didn't respond, he quickly said, "Not Bach."

"Oh?"

"Margo likes music where there's more going on. A little less quiet."

Johnathon Graystone looked like he might have a seizure. The vein above his left eye pulsed, and he pushed against the table with both hands, making Margo think he might jump up. "If you do not have quiet, you do not have time to think!" he huffed. "You like to think, don't you?"

Margo nodded.

"Well try someone else. If Bach does not ring your bell, consider Debussy or Beethoven. There are many fine composers." He turned to Logan. "Are there not?"

"There are, sir."

"I have Chopin in my baggage. After dinner, we should all listen. There's nothing better than his *G Minor Ballad*."

Everyone at the table nodded politely, and Cindy changed the subject—back to Logan.

"Tell us about yourself," she said. "You discovered planet Marge, and Maggie before it. How exactly does someone so young find two planets in less than a month?"

He shrugged, looking for too long down at his plate, like he really wasn't sure what to say. Except Margo had read that wrong. False humility. He attributed it to beginners luck, and the next second

started explaining his process with the bravado of a television preacher. Margo would have gone into a boredom coma had she not counted the number of times Johnathon Graystone should have used a contraction. Evidently, he'd come to those late.

She had almost finished eating and was again eyeing the screen door when the physicist tipped his glass at her and said, "What about Marho? Is that your name?"

She nodded, squeezing the napkin in her lap while he gestured to Cindy. "This is your daughter, am I correct?"

Cindy nodded, just slightly, like someone had told her it might rain.

"I would not have known it just by looking at you," the man proclaimed.

Cindy smiled, tight-lipped. Margo felt her stomach curl into a knot.

The physicist didn't seem to notice. "You do have her eyes," he went on. "And the two of you are both very dainty—I mean physically."

Cindy bit the head off a shrimp.

"Marho—"

"It's Margo," Logan interjected. Probably because Margo's cheeks were turning red, and that just wouldn't do. It wasn't seemly for someone to make a scene at the table. It might distract from talk about Chopin and rocks! And Logan! Phony Logan, with his charming smile and long eyelashes. In that moment, as his arm stretched out, fingers pointing to her, Margo hated him in a whole new way.

"Margo! Oh, do pardon me." The physicist wiped his mouth, and she prayed he'd turn the conversation somewhere else. "*Margo*, do you and your mother share a love of astronomy?"

"Not really," she said, and Logan's eye caught hers. Looking straight at him, she said, "I'm more interested in people."

"Oooh, psychology! That's a worthy field as well. Will you attend a graduate school?"

Cindy laughed at that. She actually laughed out loud. "Margo, in graduate school?" Her rich alto voice hung, heavy and mocking. "I could hardly convince her to attend The Kerrigan School for Young Ladies. Do you know what she told me?"

Everyone leaned forward.

"She said that she would rather go to public school."

People's eyes seemed to roll in their heads. Johnathon Graystone burst out laughing.

"And I suppose you would like to attend a state school, too, when you graduate." To Logan, he said, "Would you have ever gotten where you are now in public school?"

He cleared his throat and glanced quickly at Margo. "Well, I went to mostly private schools, but my mother is a public school tea—"

"Excuse me, please." Trying to stand, Margo found her foot tangled with his. She wished she could kick him; she tried, but couldn't reach him. As she gathered her plate and glass, she gave the table a big, fake smile. "Sorry to be going. I'm afraid I have a planned engagement elsewhere."

With her back ramrod straight, she tossed her napkin on the table and walked serenely out.

Logan stared at her chair, across from his. At her napkin, balled up at the edge of the table. She'd been clutching it. He could almost see the imprint of her fingers.

Yet she'd been fearless when she stood to leave, almost mocking.

For a wild second, he considered going after her. In that crescent of time, nothing seemed to matter except apologizing. He actually mumbled "Excuse me," and pushed his hand against the table. His leg muscles twitched, eager to carry him up.

The conversations started again as he watched her shadow disappear under an arch. His insides rearranged themselves, and Logan brought his hand up to his mouth and coughed.

He couldn't go after Margo. Of course he couldn't. What the hell was wrong with him?

He turned back to Cindy. "Sorry about that," he mumbled.

"You're fine." Her hand touched his wrist, the fingers cold. "I hope my daughter hasn't been too burdensome."

"Not at all," he said. "She's...nice."

A waiter re-filled his glass with wine, and Logan leaned back in his chair. Graystone's wheels had just started turning, meaning they could be sitting here for hours. It wouldn't do him any more good to wish for Margo than wish for a billion dollars.

*

Margo squeezed the puzzle cube hard enough to make the tendons in her hands show, and then she dropped it on the balcony's floor. She pressed her heel down on it and eased out of her chair, hoping she could break it. She couldn't.

She adjusted the folds of her robe and stepped into the bedroom, hoping the thing would be occupied. It was not. Benedict Logan was probably making out with Cindy right now. Whatever it took to get ahead, right?

Margo couldn't believe she'd let him brush her off the night before, and then she'd run to her mother's closet to cry about how pitiful she was. And then when she'd dropped her fork at dinner...

"I'm just clumsy."

Had she really acted like such a doormat?

She wished she could hit rewind and do it over. She would tell them that day school was better than boarding school, and that having piles of money didn't make you interesting, nor did it mean you could eliminate all of your contractions. She would tell the Austrian scientist that his teeth were creepy and he shouldn't stare. She would remind the physicist that her name was Margo, as in the planet Marge, which Logan had named for her in exchange for the kiss she'd given him in a moment of absolute insanity. She would tell Johnathon Graystone that his hair was cut so short she could see the mole on his scalp, and that from where she sat, he looked like a giant tool, so how was that for rich and clever?

And then she would slap her mother's laughing face. How terrible was it that she wanted to punch her own mother in the nose? She wanted Cindy to be the one in a weird place with a head injury and with no one to sit with her, uncertain what her place was, who her mother was, taken advantage of by a hot guy who turned out to be a big egotistical COCK.

There!

She'd done it!

She'd called him a cock.

“Cock, cock, cock,” she chattered, untying her robe and stepping into sleep shorts and a top.

As she marched down the hall, powered by rage that billowed like steam, she thought about his foot, hooking her ankle underneath the table. Had he *wanted* her to trip? Was he so desperate to impress everyone that he actually wanted her to fall?

Who *was* Logan Greer, she wondered as she hiked the stairs. Why had she met him?

Margo had no conscious plan at all until she reached the familiar steel observatory door, and then she thought she just might curse him out.

She flung open the door and searched the room for the mess of his hair. Only computers and other things that went beep. Oh, but there were noises from above. Human noises.

As Margo ascended the stairs, she thought about what she would say—had it all down, perfect, in her head—and was actually smiling when she heard a burst of words in German. At least she was pretty sure it was German. She didn’t speak it well or hear it very often. She looked down between the stair rails, scanning the big research room below. She heard the strange consonants again. Definitely German, definitely coming from above.

She wondered who around here would be speaking German. Was it Graystone maybe, or some other visiting douchebag? Could they possibly be chewing out Logan? Tugged by a ghost of concern, and a sprinkle of curiosity, she took another few steps. Peered into the dark room.

That’s when she heard her name. Well...maybe. She heard something that could have been “Margo,” followed by a sound that sounded a lot like “Ford.” And after that, an angry bark that was definitely: “Logan!” Followed by...something...and something else...and, in English: “focused on her, all the time!”

The speaker sounded furious. With Logan? Were the other researchers mad because Logan was spending time with her? Had being friendly with her gotten him in trouble? ...Maybe that explained his suck-up act with Bethany.

As the voices above continued their heated conversation, Reagan turned around, moving lightly down the stairs; she felt like she was floating, like a ghost.

Whatever had happened...something had made Logan abandon their...what was it, anyway? A friendship? She shook her head. It didn’t matter anymore.

Like everyone else since her father’s death, Logan had gotten close to her and decided she wasn’t worth it. When push came to shove...he’d found her ditchable. Not worth having around. Her father’s family had reached a similar conclusion, and clearly so had Bethany.

As she pushed through the door of the data room and hit the stairwell, she blinked back tears.

Walking quickly through the short, damp grass, Margo felt like a freak in a *Lifetime* movie. Back in Napa, she'd been reasonable. Well-liked. Comfy. Everything was fun, familiar. She hadn't known a single second of loneliness. How had her life changed so fast?

She was moving toward the hangar, half-sprinting like she could actually go somewhere. She couldn't. Elizabeth's family didn't want her around. She wasn't *their* daughter. Kerrigan wasn't open during summertime, and not one of her father's brothers had bothered to keep in touch. She wished, not for the first time, that the kidnappers would just take her already. That thought calmed her racing heart, made any and all threats seem null and void—even desirable; she stopped running.

She found herself standing by the trail that led down to the stables. She remembered—way too late—that she was being guarded. Watched. It was too much, knowing that a bunch of men and women with guns were probably laughing at her aimless little walk. She turned a circle, spotted a lighted greenhouse, and walked calmly to it, holding her head high, like a Kerrigan lady.

Riiiiight.

By the time she flung the slick glass door open, her eyes were overflowing with tears that blurred the army of plants. She took a deep breath, then sank down in the dirt, covering her head with her hands.

“Margo?”

Her head snapped up, but she didn't need to see to know whose voice that was.

“Logan?” She looked out, toward the rows and rows of tropical plants, but she heard him move behind her. She turned around to face him. Wiped her eyes. “What are you doing here?” How embarrassing.

For some reason, Logan looked embarrassed, too. He stood near the door, hands in his pockets, head hanging. She felt an unwanted wave of sympathy for him. He didn't deserve it—not after what happened at dinner.

She looked at the dirt floor, knowing she couldn't be as mean as he deserved when she was looking at his face. “Can you please leave me alone?”

There was a telling amount of emotion in her voice, and she hated herself for it. She hated him, too, because he walked over and dropped down beside her in the dirt. He crossed his legs, like he was staying for a while. His blue eyes met hers, and whatever he saw there must have bothered him, because he looked away.

His voice surprised her, made her jump. “I'm sorry about dinner, and about everything. I feel like a stupid kid saying this, but...ah...” He exhaled roughly. “I don't dislike you. It's the opposite. That doesn't *work* for me, so I tried to avoid you, but then you came to the barn...and I didn't know how to react to you. I didn't know how to hide...the way I felt, so I wanted to avoid you.” He sighed. “I'm sorry.”

Margo's eyes were wide. She shook her head. “Is this some kind of joke? I don't believe you.” And yet, her heart was pounding.

Logan's eyes were locked on hers, his face contrite. “If you don't, I wouldn't blame you. I've been a dick.”

“Because you like me.” She arched an eyebrow, and told herself to get a grip. He was so desperate to please everyone, now that he'd sucked up with Bethany, he had to make nice with her.

Right?

Logan hung his head, and for a long moment looked down at his hands; they were big and the one was still scratched up. She couldn't breathe, waiting for him to say something.

"I've been a dick because I'm a dick," he said quietly. "That I like you is another thing."

He looked so handsome, so sincere, she wanted to scream at him, but she bit her tongue until the urge passed. She looked at his face, his posture—still sincere, a little tense. Like he was telling the truth. She balled her hands in fists. "Let's say I decided I believed you. That you liked me. I should believe you've been acting like you have because—"

He shrugged. "Like I said, it doesn't work for me."

"And why is that?"

"The whole thing is a bad idea," he said, so soft and slow, "for several reasons. For one, you're the nicest girl I've ever met, hands down—"

Her jaw dropped. "That's a bad thing?"

He shook his head. "It's bad because I'm not."

"You're not a nice girl?" She smiled thinly.

"I'm not nice."

"Okay, right. I get it now. You're one of those guys who says some variation of 'It's me,' when in fact, it's clearly *me*."

"No—it actually is me. There's a lot you don't know about me, Margo."

"Oh, I bet," she said, shifting onto her knees, planning to get up, get out, get away from him. She was tired of being hurt.

He grabbed her hand before she could rise. "I mean it, Margo. I—I'm nothing like you. And I'm not just talking about money or being nice. We're different in...a lot of ways."

"You're a boy, and I'm a girl." She rolled her eyes, trying to keep her emotions under control. *He'd said he liked her.* But actions spoke louder... "You know, you don't have to like me. I don't feel like you owe me anything. We just talked and hung out a little and... whatever. It was really no big deal—"

"It was," he interrupted, rising on his knees. "It's just...yeah, Cindy." He rubbed a hand back through his hair, looking pained. "She's my basically my benefactor. She wants to send me to Mars." His voice took on a reverent tone. "I want to go there. I've wanted to go since I can remember."

Margo didn't know what to say to that. She'd known he wanted to be an astronaut, but was he *really* going to *Mars*? It hit her like a bolder, the thought of him doing something so dangerous, and she blinked against another round of silly tears.

He shifted positions so he was sitting with his legs folded, his elbows propped on his knees. "I think your mom would hit the fan if she knew...you know, how I feel about you."

How he felt about her...

Margo bit her lip to keep from grinning; he had feelings for her! She deflated a second later, though. He was in the middle of telling her this was going nowhere. She felt a bite of anger, followed by determination. Logan had feelings for her? She couldn't let that disappear. She wouldn't. But what could she do about it? She flipped her hair over her shoulder.

"I doubt she'd care," she said, twenty shades less intense than she felt. "I don't think she considers me her daughter. But pretending that she did, that's actually kind of understandable. Lifelong dream versus girl you barely know..."

She held her breath, praying for him to contradict her. She wouldn't beg.

"It's not like that." Logan wrapped his hand around his ankle, playing with the lace of his sneaker. "I don't feel like I barely know you."

"You don't?"

He shook his head, wiped a hand over his face, like talking to her—about this—was hard for him.

"I don't know what it is," he breathed. "I just...I don't know... You make me happier. Or something." His mouth quirked up into a mocking smile. "Ordinarily, I feel like an idiot, you see."

Her cheeks warmed, the blush spreading down her neck and chest. "Earlier I was going to look for you," she said, random and unplanned.

"You were?"

She braced her arms on her knees, looking at the dirt. "I wanted to tell you what I thought of you."

His smile was strained. "Give me a piece of it, huh?"

She nodded, thinking briefly about the researchers she'd heard talking about them. Maybe it really would make things harder for him, being close to her. She didn't want that, but then she still didn't really believe he cared for her at all. "The way you were at dinner..."

"I was an ass at dinner." He squeezed his eyes shut. "It kills me, thinking of it."

And that confession sent butterflies through her stomach. Before they dissipated, he reached out and cupped her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Margo. Really sorry." His face grew darker. "You really are better off without me."

She shrugged, dislodging his hand, which she immediately missed. "You were an ass. But do you really think being alone is better for me?"

He exhaled loudly, his eyes bleak. "You're right—you shouldn't be alone. It's wrong, the way she treats you. Cindy."

Margo's eyes teared. "It doesn't matter. I don't even know her. She's like...not even my mom really."

"Is that why you were so upset just now?"

"Kind of," she hedged.

Logan grabbed her hand. He captured it in his big, warm ones and glanced sideways at her. "You're putting me in a tough position, you know that?"

"Not exactly."

He scooted closer, looked into her eyes, so Margo felt like he was reaching into her chest and squeezing her heart. "Margo," he said. "You really shouldn't get involved with me. I know this sounds stupid melodramatic, but you shouldn't. I'm not good for you—or any girl. I shouldn't have told you...but I wanted you to know why I...behaved the way I did."

"Okay, but you still haven't explained why you're 'bad for me.'"

"I... had a weird upbringing." Something dark passed across his face, and she squeezed his unhurt hand.

"You mean with the going off to school so young?"

"No," he murmured, looking down. "Before that."

She remembered what he'd said about going home. *I don't think home's the same for everyone...*

Oh, God. She looked at his cut, bruised hand. "Logan..."

Before she could ask him anything, he was wrapping his arms around her, holding on tight. She could feel it the moment the squeeze went from one of comfort to...something else.

He pulled slightly away, and when he looked into her face, his eyes seemed odd, so dark and dazed. Like he was drunk or something. Drunk *on her*. But when she looked more closely—looked below the surface, she could still see the other thing, and she had the same feeling she'd gotten on the horse, when he had talked about going home.

"Logan, you can talk to me...if you want to," she added quietly.

From looking down, he looked at her...and his eyes were big and wide, almost vulnerable.

"Thank you," he murmured. "Margo, can we just...stay here?"

She nodded, pinned under the weight of those hypnotic eyes. Logan leaned in, his lips brushing gently over hers. The kiss was dizzying. She felt her judgment drift away as her body got hotter.

Heavier. She felt restless, hungry... She ached. She thought, *This is why they do it. All the sluts at Kerrigan. I would do it, too—with him.* Logan kissed her until she thought she might go crazy, till she had to pull away to breathe. Her body trembled, but he was rubbing her arm, tugging her gently, gently close to him.

She found his mouth again, unable to believe what he had started but wanting it. His mouth was warm and slick and sweet, his arms around her heavy and strong. She felt him shaking, and she knew it wasn't show. Those little sounds from his throat, they meant something.

The air seemed to wrap them up, his body hardening, hers melting. His eyes shone, fever-bright and hypnotizing. It was kiss and then breathe, long kiss, little gasp, rough kiss, and rougher, until the air didn't matter anymore and only Logan did, Logan with his hands in her hair and his mouth over hers, Logan who couldn't get enough of her.

He kissed a warm line down her throat as his palms cupped her breasts; his fingers stroked her nipples, and she felt on fire.

"Margo. God..."

She liked the sound of that, his hoarseness. *Want.*

Shaking, gasping, she lifted his shirt, running her right hand up his hard, hot chest. He flinched, as if in pain, but she knew that he wasn't; she let her hand slide down, running into the fabric of his boxers.

His breath caught, and she froze, too. She felt something beneath her, at just the right spot to be... "Oh...wow."

"No," he whispered, his long fingers closing around her wrist. Margo waited, thinking he would drag her hand away. She waited, because she would have pulled against him, but it didn't come to that. She smiled, smug, at the bliss on his face, Logan's eyes searched hers. He looked so hot like this. So wild.

Sweat bloomed as their hands inched lower, moving like fingers on a Ouija board—working together—down down down, until she dipped under the fabric of his underwear. For a breath she felt sick with anticipation.

And then she found what she was looking for.

He groaned out, "Stop." But he sounded drunk.

"I don't want to."

Her admission started a fire—his mouth slammed down on hers. Nothing mattered now, none of her misgivings, when he was breathing like this, his muscles tight, strong hard Logan, whispering her name like a sacrament.

Her warm hand slid down, rolling under him, then creeping to top.

His eyes flipped open.

She would never forget the look on his face. Like he was hungry, and he wanted to have *her*. That heady focus stole the breath out of her throat. She bent down, wanting better access to him. His head went back, eyes popping wide.

"Margo, STOP."

He lifted his knee, separating them, and reached down for her hand.

"You've got to stop. I'm sorry, I know it's my fault."

She had her hand on his knee; her fingers curled possessively. "You know...I wouldn't mind sneaking around to see you."

"That's not fair to you."

"I think I can say what's fair to me. I'd do a lot of things if it meant we get to see each other. We can meet here every night. Hey—you can just come back to the room!" She slapped her head.

"That's another point." He sighed. "We share a room."

“So what? We’ll have different rooms in like, a week. Remember what Jana said?”

He shook his head and stood. Margo groaned and followed him up. “What does it matter?”

“This should be enough—for both of us. I got what I wanted. So did you. It can’t continue. I shouldn’t have followed you tonight.”

She smiled. “Oh, shut up.”

“Margo, you don’t know what you’re asking for. I’m not your age. I’m not your boyfriend.”

“I don’t care.” She was surprised to find she really didn’t.

The air got heavier, seemed to press on her heart. His mouth curved down, one pliant moment when his eyes burned, and she could see how much he wanted her. He raised his hand, leaning forward, though his feet stayed locked in place.

He smiled, small and tight and maybe not a smile at all. “We should go.”

She stood there, stupidly, and he opened the door. He stepped out first and held it for her. “Coming?”

She nodded, feeling dizzy...off-kilter, but stronger somehow. He followed her out the door and they started up the pebbly hill, walking silently most of the way as she assessed his posture, breathing...as she caught his eyes sliding over her. When they neared the house, she grabbed his hand and squeezed.

“Look, Logan, just sleep on it, okay? Think about how it would be if we were something real.”

He squeezed her hand back, leaned down to kiss her softly on the cheek. “Goodnight, Margo.”

Twenty-one hours later and twenty-two kilometers northwest of The Zhu Observatory, in a crystalline cove off the island's northwest shore, Logan stacked the last keg on top of an icy steel pyramid. He was in the back of a thatch hut where, tonight, he would spend several hours serving drinks.

He rubbed his cold, achy hands on his silky black slacks; they fit a little closer than he liked, but they were nothing compared to his stiff, white linen shirt. It had "Z"-embossed onyx cufflinks, and a little black bowtie like the one he'd worn to his MIT scholarship dinner.

He felt like an ass in the dressy clothes, and it didn't help that when she'd seen him earlier, Cindy had told him he looked "dapper." Of course, he wasn't the only one tricked out like this. Most of the casa staff had been shipped to Castillo de Zhu, Cindy's fifteen-story resort, to work the Fourth of July celebration/Equirria Enterprises banquet—where, at midnight, the company's manned Mars program would be officially announced. Logan had volunteered for the gig; he'd get paid for the work, just like any day down at the barn, but this way, he'd avoid all the dull, pre-announcement chit-chat.

The guests had been trickling in for half an hour, socialites wearing sequins and tuxes, their miserable-looking kids dressed in tiny suits and puffy dresses. Most were still mingling in the hotel. Logan's hut and dozens of others like it were on the resort's municipality-sized deck, mixed in with a handful of large tents and several sparkling blue pools.

The party was there, too: swing bands, a woman making leis, stone-framed pits where other folks in little black bowties roasted hogs and grilled steaks. He scanned the crowd for a flash of red—Cindy. She'd been around for several hours, but she'd only recently slipped into her gown, a strapless, skin-tight thing that looked like it cost more than a house.

Restless, with half an hour to spare, Logan pushed through the door on the side of his booth and dove into the crowd, working his way toward the rows of glass doors and the lobby behind them. He'd decided, after a night and day of conflicted self doubt, that he wanted to see Margo. It was insane, and he still felt sleazy about keeping it a secret, but he wanted what he wanted. And the decision made him feel, for the first time in a long time, lighter. The check-up call he made on a lobby pay phone to his sister back in Georgia didn't make him feel as crappy as he usually did. He hung up the phone thinking about Margo.

When he pushed past several staff members wrestling with hundreds of balloons, and a red one escaped from the pack and sailed four stories up, Logan decided to go after it. He watched it get caught in a palm tree hanging over the open-air lobby, and, feeling slightly crazy, climbed all four flights of stairs to get it. He pressed himself against the rail, reaching out till his straining fingers closed around the string. He took the balloon downstairs, feeling strangely exuberant, like a question was answered, like the world was okay.

He smiled, walking out the doors with the bobbing thing wrapped around his wrist. Maybe he would give it to Margo.

Strange that her face was in his head, because the second he stepped out, her mother was right in front of him.

"Logan. I had wondered where you were."

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said, unraveling the balloon from his wrist as he spoke. "I had to make a call on one of the phones. Family thing. Left my cell back at the O."

She waved her tiny hand. "Don't give up the balloon."

He smiled, feeling foolish.

"I hope it was nothing serious."

"The phone call? No," he said, as she beckoned him away from the doorway and over toward a gold-fish pond.

"Have a seat," she urged, and he sat down on some rocks, feeling nervous and odd. She remained standing over him, holding a glass he hadn't noticed before. He had a sixth-sense-ish feeling that this was a bad thing, that her schoolteacher stance, lording over him while he sat there with his balloon, meant she was going to scold him. She brought her wine glass to her lips and cast her eyes up, where palm leaves crisscrossed a black sky.

Finally, she asked, "How do you like it here, Logan?"

Did she mean the hotel? He nodded. "It's beautiful."

"Castillo Zhu. Well, of course. It's a resort. How do you like the casa?"

"Um, it's good, too. I've enjoyed my time there."

"Is that all?"

Confused, Logan expounded: "It's been very important to my career, like you said it would be. And I feel very lucky that you invited me."

"Lucky." Her nose scrunched. "It's a funny word. In Chinese culture, they say luck is determined in the first breath. You inhale—" She did it herself, her sequins casting specs of red over the water and the rocks. "You breathe in and...it's like destiny."

"You mean qi?"

"You know." She smiled. "I should have known that you would know." He wondered if that was a compliment, relaxed a little bit. "So, there is qi, and there is man luck. You know about man luck?"

He shook his head, wishing that he did.

"'Man luck' is the golden rule. You've heard of that."

"Treat others the way you want to be treated."

She nodded, angling her body toward him, so her crystal glass splashed light into his face. When she spoke, her voice was soft. "Tell me this: do you want children?"

He gulped. The question was somehow intimate, and also charged. Why was she asking? What should he say? "I'm not sure, to be honest. I guess I wouldn't rule it out."

"And if you had a daughter..." Her brows arched. He had no idea what he was supposed to say, but she waited, silent, forcing him to throw the ball back.

"If I did..."

She winked, her pale face pulling in a smile that wasn't a smile.

"If you did," she said, dragging out the words. "Would you want someone who worked for you to admire your daughter?"

Oh, shit. A fist clutched the back of his throat, and, slowly, he shook his head.

"Why not?"

What could he say? *Because I wouldn't want the dickhead trying to fuck her.* That thought brought a hundred others, of himself and Margo, there in the dirt of the greenhouse, her hand on him.

Pull it together, Tripp.

"It...um, well, there are a lot of reasons that's bad. You uh, shouldn't mix business and personal, for one."

She was nodding, shrewd, subtly yet firmly egging him on.

"Honestly, if I had a daughter, I probably wouldn't be happy to see her with anyone. I'd be protective." He'd be surprised if Cindy felt that way, too, uninvolved as she'd been in Margo's life.

And yet she said, "You got it. You are smart." She whirled her beverage around, making little

bubbles that smashed against the glass. “Logan Tripp, how old are you?”

“Eighteen,” he mumbled, sweating now.

“You know how old is Margo?”

He nodded. He expected her to say more, to flay him with fifteen, but for a long time she just stood there.

Then: “In six years, you will be twenty-four. What about that?”

Logan was lost. He shrugged.

“In five years, we start our training. For Mars trip.”

The words hung between them, more accented than usual, thicker than ocean air. He couldn’t swallow, waiting for her to speak.

“Logan,” she said at last, a good witch twist upon his name, “you want to go to Mars?”

“Yes.”

Cindy reached down, grabbed his hand. She lifted it up, her pencil-thin brows scrutinizing his fingers. “You broke,” she said, and for a second, he thought she was reading the lines of his hand. “When you were ten?”

He nodded, breath held. How the hell did she know? She released his hand, and Logan had to fight the urge to tuck it under his arm. The break, like all his other childhood “scuffs,” was a secret. It shouldn’t have been anywhere in his file.

“You know, astronauts, they should not have scars or breaks,” she said.

He nodded, numb now. Was she saying he couldn’t go to Mars? What was the point, then, of scolding him for seeing Margo? Just as he opened his mouth to ask, her red lips smiled. In a jubilant voice, Cindy said—she almost shouted: “For you, I will make an exception!” She nodded once, briskly. “Man luck.”

Then she sauntered off, while his fingers opened, letting go of the balloon.

Limos lined the glossy brick driveway of the luxurious Castillo de Zhu, their smeary red taillights blotted by the arched leaves of the massive palms shrouding the drive. Margo tried to count them, but the line was too long. She clutched a glass of chardonnay that Jana had poured for her, and she wondered how, on such a tiny island, accessible only by ferry and plane or helicopter, there could ever be so many limousines.

It wasn't the glitz that was getting to her nerves. She had been to parties before, and this one mattered less than any other. Margo didn't care if she did things "right" here. A part of her wanted to do them wrong.

She downed the remainder of her drink when Jana looked the other way. Logan would be here, and she was going to find out if a night's sleep had changed his mind.

Her door opened and she took the driver's hand, standing up in her black taffeta gown. A security guy was waiting for her; he followed her and she followed Jana, who avoided the crowded lobby, taking a small stone path around the hotel to a supersized pool deck. There was a giant glowing sapphire pool in its center, with several smaller, leaf-shaped pools fanned out around it. There were at least a dozen tiki huts, stone pits where entire pigs were being slow-roasted, dozens of colored tents, lit up from inside and glowing in vibrant reds and whites and blues.

Margo's eyes snapped to Logan like a magnet. He stood in a hut to her left, serving drinks to guests and looking underwhelmed. She said a quick goodbye to Jana, asked her guard to *please* watch her from across the floor, and then forced herself forward. Her stomach was doing flips, and her knees felt like they might not hold her weight.

By the time she neared his hut, he had seen her, too. She knew this because he froze in the act of pouring someone's drink. He smoothly finished, and when the line cleared, he held a twinkling glass out.

"Would you like a drink?"

She searched his face, looking to his mouth and cheeks and brow to tell her what he'd decided.

She nodded—"Sure"—and watched relief seep through his features. She watched him reach for the chardonnay, fill her glass. He held it out to her with a smile that broke her heart. There was no sparkle in it. His face had gone pale, almost delicate. The wind blew his dark hair, and she thought, *this is it*. He would tell her "no," and she would run out to the beach, and she would have to dive into the ocean, because she would be on fire. She felt that, half a second before she noticed his eyes were fixed on something over her shoulder.

Margo turned around, and her gaze slammed into her mother.

Cindy was waiting outside the big white tent. Margo caught her eye, and she quickly realized that Logan had been right. Cindy wouldn't like them together. She turned to face him with stone in her stomach.

She opened her mouth, but her throat felt too tight for words. Logan spoke for her.

"I—" The strain on his face finished for him. Or maybe he just chickened out. He squeezed his eyes shut, looked down. For some reason, that made her mad enough to talk.

"You what?" she asked flatly.

She watched his gorgeous eyes open, felt him slide from her grip; he had joined the other team, her mother's.

"Don't bother. I can tell. You won't even look at me. That's your message, loud and clear.

Thanks for the drink.”

She started to turn, but his hand was too fast. He grabbed her wrist, and Margo froze.

“I *can*’t...”

Though her heart clenched, she spoke up in a voice that was shockingly cold: “That must be nice,” she said, “that you just *can*’t. If you can’t do something, then there’s no real choice, is there?” Her fingers snapped. “Decision made.”

She had the fleeting, useless thought that she might love him. Then she jerked her arm away. “Good luck in the space business. I hope you go *far*.”

He watched her glide to the white tent, saw Cindy beckon her inside. The older woman actually nodded at him, like *good job buddy, thanks*. Then the flap-door dropped, shutting him out.

Logan drew a ragged breath, used it to power his escape—out the side door, through the crowd. He burst into the lobby, bumping a man who cursed him in Italian. The crowd was even thicker inside, and by the time he made it into the men's room, he was gasping. He twisted the faucet, splashed his face. Astronauts weren't supposed to have scars or broken bones. The rigors of training, the pressure of G-force could tear already ruined skin, re-crack fractures that were decades old.

They weren't supposed to have the emotional baggage he had, either. For the same reasons.

And his files—medical, dental, psychological—were supposed to be private. Yet Cindy Zhu had them. Somehow she'd bought them and now his private hell was hers to know. It made him furious, but Christ, the woman practically owned him now. He couldn't even work for a rival company without worrying that Cindy would spill everything.

He walked into the lobby, toward the office, where he could get another shirt. He put his hand over the scar slicing over his left temple, and something strange hit him. He hadn't always been the way he was now. He'd been innocent once, just a kid. Innocent like Margo. A kid like Maggie.

He diverted course, headed for the pay phones. He was calling his sister, to tell her he was coming home—tomorrow.

“Do you want a drink?” Cindy looked from Margo to Jana.

The O manager nodded. So did Johnathon Graystone, and so did the Russian man beside him. The one with the girl’s name Margo couldn’t remember.

Cindy leaned to Margo and said, “Orange Blossom. Very good here.”

Margo didn’t know exactly what to say, so she nodded, sparing only a glance for her mother. Cindy placed the order, and the conversation drifted back to business. She had no place in it, of course, but she didn’t care.

Tears stung her eyes, and at that moment, Mr. Graystone’s lanky son put his hand on hers. “Vincent,” he said.

“Nice to meet you.”

She’d been staring at him off and on for the past half hour, but he’d seemed a part of the conversation—almost an adult. Funny, now that she looked at him, that she’d ever thought that. The guy was awfully thin and sort of awkward, but he had a breathtaking face, with statuesque features that seemed designed for the heir to a fortune.

He smiled, and Margo tried to decide what color hair he had. Was it light brown or blond or was it orange? Maybe a mixture of them all. It brought out his fiercely green eyes and emphasized the princely planes of his face.

“Let’s go walking,” he said, standing. He came around the table and, like a butler, held his arm for her. Cindy waved her on, and Margo almost leapt out of her chair.

“Gracias, señorita,” Vincent said when they were out of the tent. “That gig was giving me the snores.”

Margo laughed, surprised at the sound.

“If we want to have any real fun we’ve got to get rid of the shadow,” Vincent whispered.

“How do we do that?”

“Like this.” And then Vincent dashed to the left, dragging Margo with him. He cut right across a dance floor before taking a sharp left.

They ran down a flight of stone steps, onto the beach.

Laughing, Margo looked behind her. The guard was gone.

Vincent smirked. “Like I said.”

The shore was dotted with tents and several large bonfires. People were dancing, laughing. They kicked off their shoes—Vincent stuffed her Ferragamos in his coat pocket—and started walking.

“One of those tents is for Natalia,” he said. “She’s kind of a bitch, but it’s somewhere we could go.”

“Who’s Natalia?”

“You don’t know her?”

“No.”

“Natalia is Repin’s daughter,” Vincent said, like he was prompting.

“...And who is Repin?”

Vincent laughed. “The big Russian bastard we were eating with at dinner.”

“Yeah. Man-girl.”

“What?”

“His first name is a girl’s name, right?”

“Ha. Right. Valeri.”

Margo folded her arms. “I hardly know Cindy. I definitely don’t know any of her friends.”

“Well, you’re not missing much, believe me. They’re boring. Let’s go this way.” He pulled her toward the water, which lapped at the coral-colored sand. The music was fading as they moved. She heard a firecracker pop, but it was far away.

The only light came from the moon, but Margo felt comfortable. Protected, though the guy was rail-thin, and nothing about him said fighter.

“I want to hear about you,” he said. “Tell me about Cindy Zhu’s daughter.”

She felt a little off balance as she glanced at him; his face wasn’t Logan’s. Which didn’t matter. Wouldn’t matter, at least not right now. What had he been saying? Oh, yeah. *Cindy’s daughter*. “That doesn’t sound right.”

“I bet not.”

“About me... I don’t know,” she lied, thinking of Logan. *I feel like I’m going to throw up*. “There’s not that much to tell.” She’d been slapped by her hair as they walked into the wind, and Vincent noticed. He let go of her hand and began to wiggle his tie out of his shirt. While she stood there, staring, he knotted it and slid it over her head, then gathered her hair up off her face. He pulled the tie tight, and draped the silk ends down her back.

“Thank you,” she said. “That feels so much better.”

“Your boyfriend won’t like it,” he said, catching her hand again with his.

Margo stiffened. “My what?”

“Your boyfriend. The one inside the drink stand. Speaking of drinks.” He reached into one pocket and pulled out a bottle: Tutankhamun Ale. He slid his hand out of hers and put the drink in. “That’s yours,” Vincent said. “I got one for myself, too.”

“When?”

“As we were walking out the door. There was a bowl full of them. You didn’t see?”

Margo laughed. “No.”

“Well,” he said, twisting the top off his drink. “I did.”

“You’re funny.”

He grinned. “You’ve never taken a drink before, have you, Margo?”

“Have you?”

“Sure,” he said. “Plenty of times.”

“Your dad must be pretty lax.”

“Johnathon doesn’t know. He doesn’t care. But hey, have a swallow of it.”

She hesitated, and Vincent helped the bottle up to her mouth. “This stuff’s made in Cambridge. Recipe’s supposed to come from the tomb of an Egyptian queen.”

Margo got a mouthful, and it didn’t taste good at all. She made a face, and Vincent laughed.

“Keep sipping,” he said. “It gets better. And it will make the night more fun.”

Reluctantly, Margo took another sip. “How did you learn so much about drinking?”

“School.”

“Where do you go to school?” she asked.

“Eton.”

“That one in England?”

“That one.” His shoulder bumped into hers, a little jostle that made her chest ache with thoughts of Logan. Under his watchful eye, Margo took another sip.

“I thought your family was American,” she said.

“You thought right.”

“Then why do you go to school in England? There are good ones here.”

“My father wants the Graystones to be elite enough. To hang around people like Valeri Repin. He’s Russian mafia, if you didn’t know—not that they all aren’t.”

They walked in silence for a minute, and then Vincent turned them back around. “Tell me about your boyfriend. You really into him?”

Margo shrugged.

Vincent’s mouth curled. “So that’s a ‘yes.’ How did you meet him?”

She told him, and then, when he prompted her a bit, she told him a little more. She left out the juiciest details, but by the time it was over, Vincent knew more about her and Logan than anyone else alive (other than her and Logan).

“He decided it wouldn’t be a good idea,” she said, misery bleeding into her voice. “He wants to go to space with the company, and he’s worried Cindy would be mad. He doesn’t even want to try.”

“But he will.” Vincent seemed sure of it. “It’s a good thing I’ve given you my tie. That will help.”

“Make him jealous?”

“Yep.”

The party was wilder when they returned. Everybody was dancing. Vincent grabbed them two more drinks—something called Utopias this time—and pulled Margo onto the dance floor. As they twirled around, keeping step with the island music, Margo kept seeing Logan, a smudge of white in the little hut.

They danced through two more drinks before Vincent led her back to their sandals. “I’ll walk you to your mother.”

“Cindy,” she corrected.

“Cindy.” He put an arm around her, and Margo threw an obvious glance over her shoulder. She didn’t see Logan in the hut.

“Where’d he go?” she asked, and Vincent pulled her closer as they passed through a crowd.

“I think our plan worked. Your boy was relieved of duty a few minutes ago, and he looked very troubled. I’m sure he’ll come to find you any minute now.”

“Good,” she said, suddenly exuberant.

“I’ve got to get back up to our suites. My father and I are staying here with the Repins, and I’m Natalia’s host. Unfortunately, I have to entertain her.”

“I bet you like her.”

“Well, you’re drunk.” He tucked a curl behind her ear, and the two of them stopped. She realized they were just outside her mother’s hut. *Cindy*, she corrected her fuzzy head. “Cindy.”

“She’s right in there,” Vincent said, pointing.

“I know.”

“I’m going up,” he said, nodding to the hotel. “We may see each other in a little while, if Nat wants to come back down.”

“Okay. Cool.”

“Keep the tie.”

He bowed lowly and left. She looked at the hut—no Logan—then back to the tent. There was no way in the whole wide world that she was going to sit down with her mom. *Cindy*.

Yeah, screw Cindy.

She was going to find Logan. If he didn’t want to hang out with her, well, she would... What would she do?

She decided to get another drink, and stepped into one of the open bars to get it. The place had neon pink and white lights, a blue disco ball, and way too many people.

That’s when one of them caught her arm. A blond man she thought she recognized. “Miss Ford?”

She barely had time to say, “Yeah,” before he grabbed her arm and began leading her to the door.

"What is it?" Margo tried to pull against him, but her arms were so heavy.

"Your mother needs you," the man said.

Margo planted her heels and her arm slipped from his hand. "Why?"

"You have a family emergency."

Even drunk, Margo knew that was bullshit. "I don't have a family."

The man's eyes swept the room, and Margo realized who he was: Mr. Teeth! Though her brain was bleary, an awful awareness trickled through her. She turned to see what, exactly, Mr. Teeth was looking at. He lunged for her, grabbing her arm and jerking her toward the door.

"Let go of me!"

He didn't, and Margo had a thought that sent chills down her spine.

Kidnapper!

"Help!" she screamed, and his hand slammed over her mouth, bruising her lips. He practically carried her out the door as she struggled, and no one seemed to be coming!

A limo was waiting down the short stone walk, its engine idling, the back door open. She thrashed, tried to scream through his hand, and finally bit him. She was able to catch his finger in her mouth; he had a leather glove on, but she bit so hard he yelped and for a second she was free.

"HEEEEEEEELLPPPP!" she screamed. She tried to run, but she was wearing heels.

"HELP ME SOMEONE PLEASE I'M BEING KIDNAPPED!"

Teeth grabbed her around the waist. Margo screamed, and heard someone yell, "Stop!"

She looked up, saw two security guards running from either side of the path. The awful man—*he was not a scientist!*—pushed Margo to the ground, and she had only a second to register the gun in his hand before he fired three quick shots. Margo turned in time to see both guards drop like flies.

He stuck the gun in her face, and she was so terrified she threw up.

"Oh shit!"

On his shoes.

"Get up you stupid bitch!" There was panic in his voice, which, she realized, was sounding familiar. Familiar because it was angry and so thickly...German. Like in the O the night she'd gone to look for Logan!

He yanked her up by her hair and tossed her into the limo. She scrambled across the seat to the other door. Locked.

"Please let me go!"

He pointed the gun at her. "Shut your god—"

And then he was gone, tackled to the ground by a blur. Her savior snapped his arms around her kidnapper and lifted him into the air, and Margo's heart stopped when she saw his face.

"Logan!"

Margo scrambled for the door, but the limo lurched forward, throwing her against the seat. She screamed as the momentum slammed her door shut.

She tumbled forward and beat against the dark glass, but the driver didn't slow. Of course he didn't. She was numb with terror because holy shit she was actually kidnapped, she was being driven by a criminal imposter, probably to meet other criminals, to be whisked away in a boat or plane and ransomed.

"Please don't do this," she pleaded. "*Please*. I don't even really know her!"

Oh, God! Logan! Logan would tell someone. She turned toward the rear window and stared out, as the light from the hotel faded behind them. She waited for it, for the flashing lights that would signal pursuit. Waited until the road forked: right to the casa, left to somewhere Margo had never been. The limo turned left, and Margo's terror tripled.

The road narrowed, and soon they were driving along a stony beach. Boat. They were going to

take her away by boat.

“Please let me go. You can have whatever you want. I don’t even want the money!”

Just then two lights swerved into view behind her. Another limo, driving very fast and gaining. Her driver must have noticed, because her limo shot forward, squealing around turns and skidding frighteningly close to the rocky ledge.

Her kidnapper was obviously a pro, but the other driver kept gaining, somehow, and even in her terror Margo knew the other limo would catch up. She also realized that the driver must be Logan. The confidence, the precision of the driving—somehow she just knew it was him.

She felt the road level off and pressed her cheek against the left side window, trying to see what was up ahead. She had been right about the boat. It was there, maybe half a mile in front of them, a sparkling vessel in a little bay.

She turned around, and Logan’s limo was there. Like *right* there.

“Oh my God.”

He slammed into the back of her limo and she tumbled forward. She dove for a seatbelt, and was just able to get it fastened when Logan hit them again, this time on the left, so her limo slid right. The driver was able to straighten, but Logan hit them again, this time up by the back wheel. The limo shuddered, then spun out.

Logan veered sharply away, then turned back in and rammed the driver’s side door. Margo screamed as the driver lost control and her limo spun off the road.

It shuddered to a stop, and her shaking hands fumbled with her belt. She tried the doors, but they were still locked. She heard the driver’s door open and held her breath. Then she saw Logan through her window, running at her kidnapper. Logan smacked him hard on the side of the face and he was down.

“Logan!” she cried, beating against the window. He grabbed the handle but it wouldn’t open. He rushed to the front door, and she heard the locks click. She opened her door and fell out. Logan was there to catch her.

“Holy shit, Margo! Are you okay?”

“Am I OKAY?” Even her laugh was shrill. *Deep breaths. Deep breath.* “Sorry, I—”

A gunshot ripped through their conversation, the limo door jerked toward them, and Margo felt a sharp sting in her thigh.

She was dimly aware of strong hands pushing her back into the limo, then BOOM. BOOM. BOOM, and a sound she dimly thought was bullets hitting the limo. When she opened her eyes again she saw Logan’s face, a mask of horror, over her. “Let me see!” He ripped her dress from the hem all the way to where it hurt like holy hell deep in her thigh.

“Damnit. Here!” He jerked off his jacket and wrapped it around the top of her leg, tying the arms into a knot. Then, to her shock, he eased her into the floorboard of the back seat. She moaned as he propped her leg on the seat. “Stay down and put pressure on it!”

And then he ducked out, into the line of fire. “Logan!”

There were two more shots, and Logan hit the ground. Margo wanted to scream his name, but she was dizzy. She tried to sit up, and the pain made it almost impossible. She sobbed as she grabbed the cold leather seat and pulled herself up.

The horrific pain in her leg made her vision swim, but she forced herself to lean out of the car door. She saw Logan bent over the man he had knocked out.

Margo gasped. “They shot me!”

He glanced at her and his face twisted. “Jesus Margo, get back in there!”

“But you’re—.”

“You have too! I’m—”

A bullet ripped through his sentence, and Logan turned toward the boat. *Oh*. The shots were coming from the boat. Of course.

Margo looked down at her leg, and, holy crap, there was a lot of blood. She wobbled back, falling on her butt and moaning, watching through tears as Logan pointed a small gun at the boat. He fired, and her head swam. There was a volley of return fire, and then Logan started shooting again.

“Just get...in...” Margo was woozy, and not even sure if she was saying actual words. Logan didn’t get in, so maybe she wasn’t.

“Logan...”

“Hang on Margo! Security’s almost here”

Like magic, Margo could hear them. Three or four engines roaring closer.

“...My leg...” *doesn’t hurt as much*.

She was sleepy, too, and she decided that, with the good guys arriving, it was okay if she nodded off, just for a moment.

The sensation was like drifting. Drifting, drifting, drifting, and then like a buoy bobbing up out of the ocean. When she opened her eyes, it was dark, and she saw a bunch of flashing lights. Faint light come from the window with the drawn curtain. No lights from the low ceiling.

She inhaled and realized: hospital.

She was in the hospital, in a railed bed, because she had been shot.

Without trying, she made a little moaning sound, and her bleary eyes spotted something big and shadowy moving over her. She knew that it was Logan.

She said his name—it came out a squeak—and he came closer, his face bathed in the light from her monitors.

“Margo.” He reached for her hand, finding it under several layers of blankets. His hand around hers seemed bigger and warmer than ever, and she realized she was shivering.

“Margo, Margo...” He said it like a prayer, leaned down so his lips brushed her knuckles. His eyes were wide for a long time, like they’d stuck that way, and then he blinked. That seemed to settle him.

“Margo.” He squeezed her hand. “How do you feel?”

“I don’t know.” She felt dazed.

Logan’s eyes on her were earnest. “I’m sorry for what happened.”

She blinked, not sure she was hearing right. “You’re sorry...? Why? You saved me.”

She hadn’t thought before she’d spoken. As soon as the phrase left her mouth she felt stupid. Vulnerable. His tightened mouth and lifted brows were confirmation.

“You saved me from being kidnapped. You shouldn’t be sorry.” She smiled sadly. “I bet Cindy will want to make you the captain now. Of the space shuttle.”

He rocked back, and she realized he was sitting in a plastic chair. He looked down at his lap and wiped his hands on his knees, nervous gestures—obviously—because he didn’t feel like she did. Tears pooled in Margo’s eyes. She swallowed forcefully.

It was happening again—like at dinner that night on the porch. Logan was awkward and somewhere else, but even so, it startled her when he said nothing.

Beep beep beep beep beep beep: her heartbeat—racing. She recognized the awful sound from her dad’s days in the cancer ward. If it kept beeping that fast, someone would come.

She reached for the monitor, and after half a second found the silence button. She settled back onto the pillows and looked down at her body—numb and half forgotten. She felt tired, she realized. Her eyelids and her head felt heavy. “What happened?” she murmured.

“You got shot. Do you remember that?”

“Uh huh.”

“When we got you here, you had surgery. The bullet was wedged... well, the point is, they got it out and you’re going to be fine.”

She shut her eyes and tried to feel her lower body. She sensed a heaviness near her thigh.

“Big bandage.” She sighed. “I bet that’s not too hot.”

Logan leaned down, surprised her by wiping her hair off her head with gentle fingers. “You look beautiful.”

“You don’t have to say that.”

“I know.”

A beat of silence passed, just long enough for her shallow breath. And she knew, somehow.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.” He sat back, not as far away as before, but no longer touching her or the bed. He rubbed his head, like he’d been wearing a sweatband and was overheated. “Margo, I’ve got...some things at home. I’m from Georgia, you remember. I’ve got a little sister there. My mom. Being here...with you. I kind of realized there are some things back home I need to do. It’ll be better that way. That way...” He swallowed; his Adam’s apple bobbed.

The heart monitor picked that second to turn itself off “mute.” The beats peeled through the room, loud and way too fast. Exposing. Humiliating. She slapped the button, let her chest fill up with cooling anger.

“You don’t have to explain anything to me. You have things to do. I have...well, I have a broken leg. It’s broken, right?”

He nodded.

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m a pro at solitaire.”

“Margo, wait, hang on.” His face had lit up with concern. “There’s some stuff I want to tell you, too.”

“That’s good. Thanks, Logan. But you said you’re leaving.” *Inhale. Exhale.* She thanked God for painkillers.

“Yeah.”

Margo looked at him, and she made her voice steady and just a little condescending, the way she’d heard her father do for work, when he was talking to someone he didn’t like. “I had a great time with you. I’m glad we met. I’m really glad—” she laughed, distant— “because you saved the day, big time. I understand where you’re coming from. With your goals and...the whole thing with Cindy. There’s nothing wrong with that. I understand. Good luck with things. I won’t forget about you, and when you go to space, I’ll watch and tell my friends how much you meant to me this summer.”

Logan’s mouth had opened. She stared at him, willing it back shut. Whatever he said would be wrapped in barbed wire.

“Margo—”

“It’s okay. It is. I promise. Thanks for staying with me. Thank you.”

Logan’s mouth pressed flat. He nodded. Squeezed her hand.

“You can go now. I’m okay.”

“So you don’t need...”

“Nothing.” She shook her head. “I don’t need anything from you.”

He stood slowly, nodding a few seconds too long while staring at her dully. He was probably already ‘somewhere else.’

Margo told herself it didn’t matter, willed the wobble out of her voice. “Thank you again, Logan.”

“Uh...well. You’re welcome.” He wiped his hands on his jeans and stared down at her. He looked lost.

“You helped me. I appreciate it. No hard feelings.”

He nodded again, and she memorized his face. Memorized his shoulders, ass, his legs, his gait. Memorized the moment as he walked away.

A few minutes later, a nurse came in with a syringe.

“Miss Ford. How are you, dear?” When she didn’t speak, the woman patted her hand gently. “Your heart rate is a little high. I think you need some more Demerol.”

Margo nodded. Shut her eyes.

Epilogue

The Kerrigan School for Young Ladies spared nothing at Christmas time. For the Jewish students, it was Hanukah, of course, and Kerrigan observed that as well—with all students welcome to participate in celebrations for each holiday—so by the middle of December, they were exhausted from festivities and glad to migrate home for the annual Intermission.

The last weekend before Christmas, there was always a ballroom dance. This one was Margo's first. She'd never been at Kerrigan for the holidays. As she sat at her dressing table, peering into a magnifying mirror and smoothing blusher on her cheeks, she couldn't help remembering the previous December. Dressing with Molly, Hannah, and Lakelyn for the Great Grapescape—a vineyard scavenger hunt followed by a midnight dance at her old school. She'd worn a soft green Prada gown and danced all night with her then-crush, Peter Calman.

"Do you know what color tie Alton is wearing?" Elizabeth's question made Margo jump. She'd almost forgotten she wasn't alone in the dorm room. She turned to face her roommate, who was perched at her own mirrored dressing table gluing on fake eyelashes Elizabeth called "beauty enhancements."

"No. I don't. I haven't really talked to him since Sunday."

Alton St. James was one of the most well-regarded guys at Kerrigan's brother school, Maloney Prep. Margo had met him at an equitation several weeks after she'd rejoined the equestrian team.

"Sunday?" Elizabeth's blue eyes narrowed. "Why so long?"

"He's had the flu, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. Damn, my glue is drying." Elizabeth turned back to her mirror, and Margo watched her in her own. Her bestie hadn't been the same since she'd started dating Michael. It wasn't a bad thing—in fact, Margo was glad for her—but it did make Liz forgetful. Which wasn't necessarily a good thing, since she was so absentminded already.

For the next two hours, the pair chatted about classes, teachers, friends, and holiday plans while they filled the room with hairspray and perfume. They debated earrings and bracelets, speculated on who would be doing what with whom (and why), and, finally, zipped each other into gowns.

"Eeeee! I'm so excited, it's just stupid." Liz gave a silly little hop, unable to keep a big grin off her face. "Mar, do you think I should invite him to come to the chalet? Just for a couple days? He'll be in Zürs anyway. It's his dad's Christmas, and Mike said it's where they always go to ski."

Margo forced her own face into a smile. "Definitely. You should."

"You wouldn't mind?"

"No, not at all."

Without any holiday plans of her own, Margo was tagging along for the Timberdimes' Christmas in the Austrian alps. Every time they talked about it, she couldn't help remembering her kidnappers, a group of scuzbags tied to a terrorist group in Munich. Their leader, Mr. Teeth, had been killed in the shoot-out the night of the party. She'd been asleep, but Jana had filled her in. Logan had mortally wounded another man; he'd died in a hospital in San Juan.

"Margo. Earth to Margo." Elizabeth's heart-shaped face bobbed a few inches from Margo's. Her brows drew together. "You okay?"

"Yep. Most def."

"How's the leg?" The question was asked with hesitation. Even Elizabeth felt uncomfortable mentioning Margo's ordeal. Margo understood; she didn't like to think about it, and it showed.

"It's good. Still needs a few trips to the tanning bed," she joked. She was doing physical therapy to strengthen her left leg, but it was a minor inconvenience compared to the wheel chair and leg-immobilizer she'd used after being discharged from the hospital.

Before Elizabeth could ask anything else about the Summer That Should Not Be Mentioned, Margo grabbed her clutch, slid her iPhone in, and turned toward the full-length mirror.

Elizabeth gave a cat call, and Margo mustered a smile. This year, her dress was Marc Jacobs; royal blue, light blue, and white, it was fun and flouncy, with a dramatically high collar. She'd paired it with flats since she didn't trust herself enough in heels yet. Margo touched her wavy, air-dried hair and Elizabeth grabbed her elbow.

"C'mon girl. Vite, vite!"

They were walking out the door when Margo's phone rang. No, it beeped. She fished it out and saw a text—from Alton.

Mar- i need a rain chk. so sorry. wanted to go but still feeling
shit. h. laurel is my proxy. -al

Margo smiled at the Herbert Laurel joke. Mr. Laurel was the boys' equestrian instructor, a super hottie who had actually modeled for Ralph Lauren in college.

"Well," Liz demanded. "Is it Alton?"

"Yep." She inhaled, let her breath out slowly. "Al can't come."

"No way! That little rat! Still sick?"

"Still sick."

"Oooh, Mar. Will you still go?"

"I'll come down in a little while." Elizabeth protested, even offered to ditch Mike and go as Margo's date, but Margo wouldn't budge.

"I'll wait till things get started, then I'll come."

Elizabeth didn't want to leave her in their room, but Margo wouldn't sway. The truth was she didn't plan to go down to the ballroom at all.

Margo planted herself in their big bay window, the one that hung out over the rolling lawn and mossy woods out to the east. Kerrigan had hundreds of acres. Maybe she would walk them like a ghost on the moors. She'd been reading *Wuthering Heights* for advanced English Lit and was identifying with it a little too much.

She leaned her head on the window frame and fiddled with her phone, looking through her call log. Alton was a frequent caller. Their relationship worked well because Margo wasn't interested in any guy, and Alton wasn't interested in any girl. His romantic preference was a secret until his father—a Virginia senator as conservative as Margo's father had been liberal—finished paying for his school, and Alton kept the secrets Margo couldn't bring herself to tell Liz. Not when her BFF was so buoyant over Michael...

Other than Elizabeth and Alton, there were a few calls from Cindy's security people—two of whom now had posts in New Orleans, a call from Margo's financial adviser, and two calls from Jana.

Margo had bonded with the Observatory manager after the almost kidnapping, as Jana had taken it upon herself to nurse Margo back to health. Margo was happy to get her calls, but the woman kept prodding her to give Cindy another chance.

She love you. She has her own way.

Maybe it was true. Cindy had called a few times, talking slightly more with each phone call. Though Margo still didn't feel warm fuzzies toward her, Cindy had invited Margo back to Isis for

“real time together,” when Cindy would actually be there.

Thinking of returning to the island made her think of Logan. No way around it. Sometimes at night she still awoke hearing gunshots—or, worse maybe, feeling his hands on her...his mouth on hers.

Margo told herself she didn't care. She was an awful liar.

The truth was, she thought about Logan even on days she didn't dream of him, and time hadn't made it any better. She was beginning to think she would never be able to forget him—or feel interested in anybody else. She was already dreading the day when he'd be on magazine covers and talk shows. Cindy had officially selected the Mars crew, and in a special TIME magazine that explained the technology their shuttle would rely on, Logan had already been featured. Margo had even heard some of the girls at Kerrigan talking about him. She tended to hear that kind of talk since people now realized Cindy was her mother.

She focused her eyes on the candles being lit on the lawn. On the trail, toward the ballroom, that was already scattered with couples. She told herself not to think about Logan and all his girlfriends.

He didn't want you. He didn't want to stay.

In fact, he'd left her in a hospital bed. What could speak more clearly of his feelings?

Margo noticed Liz's bright red dress—glued to a tux she assumed was Mike—and decided she would walk the trail. It was a little silly maybe, but since when did that stop her?

It didn't take her long to leave the dorms and make her way across the lawn. She was headed toward the woods at a quick, angry pace when someone grabbed her arm.

“Alton?”

He looked like death in a pair of plaid night pants, white undershirt, and moccasin bedroom shoes, and he was waving his arms around like someone drowning. His black hair stuck up everywhere.

“Margo!”

“What are you doing, Alton?”

His eyes widened. “Trying to find you! Were you hiding?”

“No.” Alton's brows arched. “Maybe. Okay, kind of... Why?”

He turned and pointed to a giant oak tree a dozen feet away, whose base was surrounded by a wooden bench. Margo squinted. The tree looked normal. Dark...

“Alton, are you okay?”

And then she saw someone walking out into the little clearing.

Alton turned and started walking toward the shadow. She watched him slap the figure's shoulder, flash a thumbs-up her way.

She expected... a security guard? Or was it Cindy (a taller, broader Cindy)? For a second, she even thought of Mr. Timberdime. Then the moonlight hit the shadow's face, and all the blood left Margo's head.

It was a mistake. An accident. Logan had come to New Orleans to...visit a museum. Go to Bourbon Street. He'd come here because Cindy had asked him to talk to the headmistress about... science. He would be a guest-speaker. Motivational. At the dance.

It was the only explanation for his suit. For his presence.

As he neared, Margo felt her cheeks heat up. Her whole head flamed, eyes watered, legs shook.

His brown hair was cut shorter. His shoulders looked a little wider. This was a different guy, she told herself. They were divided now by time, by circumstance, by choice.

And yet...he reached for her. Margo stuck her hand out, and Logan's torso smashed into it as he wrapped his arms around her.

She had gone insane, surely. Hallucinating. His mouth was in her hair, he was saying something and it sounded soft and serious. His lips were on her head, her cheek, her chin. His body was overtaking hers like a wave...undertow tugging her out out out so she could feel smell think nothing else but Logan.

The shock of it made her stiffen. She couldn't move, she couldn't breathe.

And then he pulled away. Logan let go of her and gravity returned.

"Sorry. I'm sorry, Margo." His eyes flickered over her. His mouth was half open. She could hear him breathing, see the ghost clouds of his breath in the cool, wet winter air.

"I— how are you? Oh Jesus, do you have a date? That guy, Alton, he said there was a thing tonight... I— God, I'm sorry."

He turned away, and Margo's pulse tripped. "Logan—*wait*."

In another second he had closed the gap between them. He stood so close she could feel the heat of his body, smell his shampoo, familiar mountain fresh. She watched his mouth move, no words coming out.

"Logan, what are you doing here?" She felt like she was in a play. Or maybe in a mental institution.

"I have a guest speech." Margo clutched her chest. "I have a guest speech tomorrow at the prep school. It was the only way I could get away during finals. I... I had to see you."

He came to see me.

"Why?" She didn't mean it the way it sounded, but of course she had to know. "Why do you want to talk to me?"

He rubbed his hair, blinked those wide eyes. Clearly, he was upset. Agitated.

"Is it something with...the stuff that night...you saved me?"

Logan was shaking his head. She watched his throat work, his fists clench. Unclench. "Margo..." He let his breath out slowly. "Margo, I came here to see you. I needed to tell you a few things. I'm looking into housing here."

"What?"

He inhaled deeply, watching her face like he was about to say something vitally important. "Margo, I've transferred to Tulane."

"You have?"

"I'm starting there this spring. Pre-med."

"Pre-med?" She didn't understand.

"I'm not going to be an astronaut." Logan smiled ruefully. "At least not at first. I'm going to get a medical degree first, then maybe work my way into space medicine. If I go to space..." he shook his head, "it won't be with Cindy. I'm not telling anyone until after my speech tomorrow at the prep school."

"What about your...what about Cindy? Why would you leave MIT?"

"Because of you."

"Because...of me?" She felt like she'd swallowed a frog.

Logan was nodding, but she still didn't understand.

"So just...you wanted to see me again?"

"Margo, yes." He sounded breathless. "I want to see you all the time. I want to live here, near you. I don't want to go away again, Margo. I want you in my life. Is that okay?"

Was that okay?

Margo giggled. It started as a silly little sound and turned into an insane cackle.

"But Logan," she gasped, "how will you afford it?"

She watched a wry smile spread across his face. "There was a reward for whoever caught your

kidnappers. Cindy gave it to me.”

That brought on more laughter. “But...” another gasp— “it’s only five-hundred-thousand—”

“No it’s not. It never was. Cindy was always offering ten million.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Apparently she’d asked the media to keep it on the downlow so you didn’t become a target. I got the money. I transferred to Tulane. And you know what?” He grabbed her hands. “After that, I’m thinking Stanford for med school.” He grinned, and it was like the sun.

“I heard they’re good at that at Stanford.”

“Someone told me.”

“Who?”

His gaze softened, mouth pressed flat and vulnerable; then the corners tipped up. “My girlfriend?”

She grinned, nodded, and Logan’s arms were closing tight around her.

“Your girlfriend,” she gasped. And then leaned in for his kiss.

If you liked Logan and Margo's story, check out these scenes from two of Ella James' other books: *Stained*, book one in the award-winning YA paranormal Stained Series, and *HERE*, first in a YA sci-fi romance trilogy. Both are out now!

STAINED...

The monster clawed the dark sky, hissing and spitting and belching ash. Its fat orange talons twisted the little house until it cracked, until the walls caved and the roof collapsed.

Neighbors sprang from their quiet homes and stumbled to the yard, drunk from the light, shouting for help. And for nothing. No one inside was alive.

Julia knew this.

She watched the fire as it swelled, as it swallowed glass and gulped brick. She watched while her clothes and books and, *God*, the bodies of her parents, stoked the beast.

The wet Memphis wind whipped smoke through her hair as the remains of the little house on Galloway Avenue rained over the street.

Sirens wailed, frantic screams interrupted by the sound of a million kettles screeching: *The end! The end!* And it was the end.

But not for the sirens. They wailed and wailed and wailed—God why were there sirens, hurrying drivers running red lights, when no one was alive?—and lo, the Angel of Death appeared in the air above her home. All black skin and white teeth and red, red eyes. She thought he was laughing, but before she could be sure, his long wings beat the dirty air and he was gone.

Julia staggered into the shadows between her yard and the next. The path behind her led to Dirk and Dwight's house, through two tidy yards and down three doors.

She shook her head, squeezed her eyes shut. It hadn't been late. Not that late. Dirk had Ms. Botch for pre-cal. Ms. Bitch. He couldn't do math, and Dwight just plain couldn't do school, so Julia had laced up her new pink All-Stars, slipped her notes into her pocket, and sneaked out the window. She hadn't bothered peeking into her parents' room. They were snorers, so she knew they were asleep.

Julia had sat on the boys' front porch and explained trigonometric functions, her cereal-box watch reading 12:40 a.m. when she arrived. Now it read 1:08. Twenty-eight minutes. Twenty-eight minutes and this.

The neighbors stayed near the crumbling curb, bobbing heads together, palms pressed over eager mouths. Soon they would be talking. That foster girl and that poor, sweet couple. Such a shame.

Julia searched for a cue in their script, but she couldn't find her lines. Because she didn't have any. Because she would be gone.

She couldn't go back to the state, not after five years of paradise. Harry and Suzanne had been her parents since she was twelve, and she would follow them into the annals of the neighborhood's folklore.

As red and white and orange light jumped across cotton gowns and tragic faces, and the

sirens out-whined the noise of the inferno, Julia walked away.

It was the water that startled her out of it—startled her awake. Somehow, she'd gone to sleep standing, and when Julia came to, she was a long way from home. The girl who could barely do two miles for PhysEd had walked—well...her brain didn't seem capable of guesstimation, but it was a stretch. From Overton all the way to the muddy Mississippi.

She was a gunshot from downtown, her bare feet bunched over the short grass that fringed the river. She took a few wobbly steps back, almost into Riverside Drive, and someone's import horn reminded her of her place.

Heart pounding, Julia crossed the street. She followed the sidewalk past a steep hill bearing a row of river-view homes, until the neighborhood folded into itself and the pretty painted houses became old gas stations, abandoned buildings, and squalid apartment complexes.

Julia sank her nails into her palms as she passed a patch of deserted warehouses. One, a white brick ruin with a faded pecan mural, caught her eye. She ripped three weathered boards off a window and shimmied inside.

Suzanne always bought a giant bag of roasted pecans for Christmas, and that's what the place smelled like: Christmas. And plastic.

It looked like a nightmare. Crates and boxes and overturned chairs littered the floor. Thick cobwebs covered the corners, and every surface sported a layer of grime.

There were three locked offices and two bathrooms; the men's had a cracked porcelain sink that worked, and the women's had a toilet that still flushed—barely. Julia found a torn gray tarp covering a stack of crates and, thinking blanket, ripped it off.

The boxes tumbled down, spilling bucketfuls of rotten, black pecans.

Julia stared at them and her skin came alive, jumping over her bones like a horse's jittery coat. Once the shaking started, she couldn't make it stop. She fumbled to her feet, gasping for air. She tripped over a piece of plywood and crawled the rest of the way outside.

She fell asleep under a scrawny oak tree and slept through the night—a stupid thing to do anywhere, much less in Memphis. She woke up cold, confused, and aching.

Julia thought about the twins as she rubbed her neck. If it went right, the cops would think she was dead, so she couldn't see Dirk and Dwight again. Not even at school, which she suddenly realized she would never again have to attend. Suzanne and Harry would have knocked her a good one for dropping out, but she didn't care. School was nothing. Not really. She was smart enough already.

To celebrate, she relieved a convenience store of two candy bars, a can of Grapico and, on a whim, scissors. Back in the warehouse, she chopped her thick black hair to her shoulders and frowned at the cloudy mirror.

The girl frowning back was a stranger. Without the ebony curtain around her face, Julia's smallish mouth and unremarkable nose stood out. Her big brown eyes looked even bigger. She could see too much of her high cheekbones and honey-colored skin. And without the weight of her mane, she felt too light.

The difference in her appearance made her feel faint, so she fled the bathroom and tucked herself into her tarp.

The sleep was beautiful. Lying half-awake was a new kind of heaven, though its wonder was relative. The next thing she stole was a bottle of NyQuil, and she spent an entire day asleep.

She might have slept forever, but a loud thud woke her sometime late that night. Julia jerked up, heart pounding, senses scanning though she had no idea why.

Then she heard it: a series of thuds on the warehouse roof. She pulled the tarp to her chin as clouds of dust rained over her. The banging continued for probably half a minute before it stopped. Julia counted to ten before she opened her eyes, and several more seconds passed before she dared to breathe.

“What the—”

The roof exploded. Julia covered her head as wood beams and chunks of concrete crashed down around her. She pressed against the wall until the racket became a whimper. When the dust cleared, she peeked over a pile of rubble and gasped.

Dozens of glossy charcoal feathers settled around a hole in the floor at least half a foot deep. A guy was inside. She swiftly registered broad shoulders, hard muscle, and dark hair.

A hot guy. Very hot. He had, too literally, fallen at her feet.

HERE...

The day it happened, things were regular enough.

Halah, Sara Kate, and Bree had spent the night—a chilly October Friday we’d talked through until the sun rose, pink and soft across the Rockies. I awoke to Sara Kate’s knee in my back, sharp enough to poke a hole through my favorite Rolling Stones t-shirt. Halah and Bree were curled up on the floor, Halah’s pink subzero “hotsack” tossed over the Miley Cyrus bag Bree’s grandmother had given her the previous Christmas—the year we’d turned 15. Halah called the bag Miss Miley, and at sleepovers at Sara Kate or Halah’s house, I usually fought Bree for “her.”

This morning, Halah’s curly head stuck up, and her hazel eyes met mine. We grinned, then pounced on Bree, chanting “Miss Miley, Miss Miley, Miss Miley!” till Bree lurched up, her curvy body raining fragments of the popcorn we’d all munched and, later, crunched into my rug.

“Shhhhhh!” That was Sara Kate, lumbering up and glaring at us. She was never a morning person, and she’d been even less one since she’d started hanging out with Ami McVea of the multi-colored dreadlocks and **Turn Off Your Radio** (KILL THE MACHINE) bumper sticker. S.K. hadn’t actually told me this—I was only her best friend, after all—but I’d overheard her talking to Ami after band practice, saying something about midnight rides, and I happened to know from my college cousin West that Ami and S.K. had been sneaking out on weeknights, riding in to Denver to go to (what else?) indie music shows.

“You’re riding with the big dawgs. This ain’t no rusty banged up Beetle,” Halah drawled. She had the most ridiculous faux Old West accent I’d ever heard, and she was referencing Ami McVea’s VW bug. We—the quad—had called ourselves the big dogs in years past, although I couldn’t quite remember why.

Bree ambled over and barked in Sara Kate’s ear. S.K. batted her off, then slid out of my bed and pulled a Pop Tart out of her overnight bag; she’d always had a thing for sweets. Halah braided Bree’s hair, and S.K. painted her toenails with my electric lilac polish, and I straightened my room and made us waffles, which we ate on the downstairs couch, watching *Jeopardy* re-runs that Halah killed, cause that girl is awesome with random facts, despite what she wants our school to think. (Re:

brainless, badass, and beautiful).

Half an hour later, the four of us stood in the pebbly indentation of my driveway, a time-shorn path through the rough grass that dusted the foothills of the mountains.

I looked at Bree and Halah, a unit within our unit, best friends just like S.K. and I. “You guys be careful.” I smiled tightly. “Halah, spare Robby the crotch shot.”

Robby Malone was this senior who’d cheated on one of Halah’s cheer teammates—Annabelle Monroe, the blonde cheerleader archetype—and also, apparently, the bull’s eye in the day’s paintball meet-up.

Halah grinned wickedly. “I’m not going for his crotch, Milo. I’m going for his little tiny balls.”

“That’s disgusting.” Bree’s nose scrunched.

“Keep her out of trouble, mkay?”

Bree shrugged. She had a piece of popcorn smashed under her breasts.

“I want pictures,” S.K. called, as Hal and Bree set off.

“Only if they can’t be used against us in a court of law,” Halah called back.

They drove away, aiming for the far-off fence at the front edge of Mitchell property. Hang a left, and they’d be on a gravel road that ran below the massive Front Range, just a tiny ribbon if viewed from the top of the peaks, up by turbines.

Mitchell Turbines.

Mitchell Windfarm.

Home.

S.K. was never much for goodbyes, and after all, we didn’t know that’s what this was. That bright gray morning was just an ordinary Saturday, on an ordinary weekend in our junior year at Golden Prep, the only decent private school our side of Denver.

“Have fun with Bambi,” she said, and tossed her black hair, like the glossy, perfect mane annoyed the heck out of her. (For the record, it really did).

“Have fun with Jackie Chan.”

That would be her Tae Kwon Do instructor, a big, smiling hottie whose actual name was David.

S.K. arched one brow. It jutted up over the frames of her black, square-ish glasses.

“Sayonara,” she said.

And that was that.

a

My plan for the afternoon involved a dart gun, a tracking bracelet, and my beat-up copy of *The Great Gatsby*.

I had a seasonal reading plan I’d stuck with each year since fifth grade: *Walden* in the spring, *Pride & Prejudice* in the summer, *The Great Gatsby* each fall, and *Wuthering Heights* every winter (my dad’s dad, Gus Mitchell, had been a tenth-grade English teacher). I liked to imagine the rock-strewn, fir-dotted fields that rolled out toward the mountain range as my moors. In the privacy of my favorite woodsy spot, I savored my cold-weather reading with a gusto that would humiliate me in the halls of Golden Prep.

With *Gatsby* in my pack and the dart gun in my gloved fist, I drifted through the fields, watching fir needles tremble, tracking birds as they rose and fell, formed flocks and scattered. They’d be leaving in the next month, before it got too cold for anything

sans fur.

I wondered if my herd of mule deer would already be there: by the creek that threaded through the northeast edge of our land. I hoped not. If they were waiting, I couldn't sneak up on them. Encroaching winter made it especially important that I tag the last of the year's fawns—*now*. When the snow came, their grazing patterns changed. The creek would ice over and the herd would scatter, seeking out the Bancrofts' hot springs or one of the freeze-proof waterfalls just north of our property, on the land owned by Mr. Suxley.

As I walked, arms stuck in the pockets of my dad's old hunting coat, I thought back over the night. I was a cataloguer, but like too many other times lately, I felt like I didn't have enough to file. I seemed to be moving at a different pace from all my friends. Halah—Halah with her unabashed love of Martin Lawrence movies and her closet full of oversized softball t-shirts—had shot off, three light years ahead of me. She had a senior boyfriend on the wrestling team, and she didn't have a curfew.

Bree was just...Bree. I didn't even have a scale for how she and I compared. While I thought about everything ad nauseum, Bree never seemed to think about anything that wasn't practical. The week before, she'd spent half of lunch on her phone trying to find the area's best dry-cleaner.

And then there was S.K. Sara Kate, my best friend. My other half. My favorite person on the planet—other than my Dad, who wasn't on the planet anymore. S.K. who'd gone with (guess who?) Ami to ComicCon the weekend of my birthday. Who'd recently decided she needed more time by herself. "I'm getting too stressed out by all this *stuff*." Stuff being me. The quad. Our fun.

Lately, the thing I liked best about this deer gig was how *somewhere else* it made me feel. With the sky over my head and the grass crunching under my boots, I could be anywhere. Add a book to the equation, and I wasn't Milo Mitchell, girl pianist, airheaded over-thinker, tenth-grade chemistry straggler, secret wallflower, lover of anime. I was Catherine. Well... maybe someone slightly less insane. Daisy Buchanan? Okay, someone moderately less shallow. Haruhi Suzumiya.

Made-up (and insane!) though they were, those people knew what they were about. Knew what they wanted. Whereas me... I got my kicks tagging mule deer.

I pointed myself left, toward the mountains, and picked up my pace for the last mile to the pine grove. There was a bluff oak right at the entrance, beside a big pancake-looking boulder, that, next to the skinny evergreens, resembled a pom-pom in mid-cheer.

Growing up, this had been my dad's favorite spot. He and mom had come to Colorado to build the turbines—Mitchell Wind Turbines, his own patented design—but his real passion was outdoors stuff. As a little girl, I'd gone tromping through the fields and scaling cliffs with him. He'd taken me to Yellowstone and Grand Teton, Death Valley and Yosemite, but he'd really loved to take me to the bluff oak.

"It's an anomaly," I could hear him say. "Supposed to be down South. Not out here with all the firs."

And yet, it was.

I walked under its limbs and stared down at the etched stone marker:

Faulkner Dursey Mitchell

And then, under that, in tiny, sharp-edged caps:

IN WILDERNESS, THE PRESERVATION OF THE WORLD

I didn't like the marker, though I knew my dad had chosen it. In his absence, I'd grown irritated with the message. Preservation. What a stupid concept. My father wasn't preserved under the headstone. He was gone, and he was becoming more and more gone all the time. So was everything.

Still, I'd come. Since that awful day almost two years ago, I'd visited the marker and the bluff oak often. Actually, I'd treated this place like Mecca until two months before.

It had been the first Saturday after school had started. S.K. had spent the night, but left early the next morning for her first date with Ami. Halah was at a cheer retreat, and Bree was...somewhere. I don't remember.

I'd left at the same time as S.K., and by the time I got to the pancake boulder I was falling asleep on my feet. I took a nap—the boulder was that flat—but maybe an hour later, I was jerked awake.

I felt like someone was over me—I felt breath on the back of my neck. I rolled right, off the rock, and jumped to my feet, ready to bolt. But no one was there.

I ducked a second later, because I felt it again, and then I yelped. A needle prick, but inside my *brain*. It was invasive, intentional. Prodding.

I felt like I was naked in front of the whole school.

I left immediately, and spent the walk home freaking the f out. But I found my way back the next day. And felt the same thing. It wasn't as sudden, or as potent, but the feeling, like I was being *measured*, was still there.

As it was Wednesday, when I went back after half a week.

That's when I decided I needed to find another way to feel close to Dad. So I called the Department of Conservation and Wildlife, posing as my mother, and got permission to continue his mule deer tracking project.

I had all his old folders, stuffed with diagrams and data, so it hadn't been hard to figure out who was who among the herd. After that, it was just a matter of coming out on Saturdays and tagging them.

It was easy to shoot the sedative gun, bring the deer down, and snap a bracelet over their hard, dark hooves. I spent my weeknights, after studying, watching the gob of blinking lights move across my laptop screen. I knew where they slept and where they roamed. I knew where they went midday: the creek.

I made my way over to it now, ducking under broom-like spreads of fir needles, weaving through sap-dotted pine trunks, crunching over fallen leaves from the seasonal trees that blazed orange, yellow, and red between the firs.

I heard the creek before I saw it, a gentle tinkling like a bowl of glass marbles pouring out. The smell of dirt and pine filled my nose and throat. The cold air whipped my cheeks. The sunlight swirled in spirals over the leaf-strewn bank. I thought about *Gatsby* and felt a dorky burst of excitement. I was right at the start of Chapter 9—the last chapter. I'd gone through the book too fast.

Reading the end made me feel either bursting full or empty. I walked faster, hoping this would be a day that I could enjoy the story without letting it gnaw at me. Otherwise it was going to be a long afternoon.

My tree house hung above a bend in the creek. Dad and I selected the strongest tree for its base: a horse-chestnut on the other side. To get to it—if I didn't want to wade through chilly, waist-deep water—I had to climb a spiral staircase around a buckeye tree and sway across the rope-and-board bridge we made the summer after second grade.

The wooden stair rails were cold, even through my gloves. I paused at the top and surveyed the scene below. It looked like a high-def screensaver, birds shifting on branches, leaves tilting almost mechanically in a tranquil breeze.

With that thought—myself a pixilated winter girl moving slowly through a data forest—I slid my palms over the ropes and crossed the sanded cedar planks. The tree house was at the other side; it was a thatch-roofed dome attached to the chestnut's trunk by beams that angled peaceably through its branches.

I pushed inside, surprised, as always, by how pretty it was here. The walls were warm cedar, and my Dad had built a bench that wrapped around the circular room. We used to get new cushions every year, but the green and red plaid we'd put out two Christmases ago would probably stay until the years ate through them. I had no plans to replace them.

I found my binoculars in the box where I'd left them, along with a blanket, a tin tub of almonds, and a little pile of air-activated hand-warmers.

I sat my pack down, grabbed the binoculars, and shed my gloves. Much as I wanted to stay warm, I couldn't fire the darts with padded fingers.

I gave myself a few minutes inside the house, designed with small gaps in the floor in the floor for circulation, but no windows (to hold heat in). Then I stepped back onto the bridge and sat with my back against the door. My gaze roved the forest, picking out stray branches, odd-shaped stumps—anything that remotely resembled deer. Too early. I'd spotted them this morning near Mr. Suxley's woods, where they sometimes bedded down. It would take a little while for things to happen.

I read. Nick Carraway, meeting up with Tom downtown. Leaving the West Egg. I sipped warm water from a metal thermos and tried not to think about my hunger, which couldn't be satiated in nose-range of the deer. The sun climbed higher, raining a kaleidoscope of golden light over Dad's bulky suede jacket and my camo pants. As I read, my hair sparkled in my periphery, a blanket of glossy brown, with red highlights glinting in the sun. I blew into my balled-up hands. Applied a scentless beeswax chapstick.

I couldn't warm up. I cursed myself, Klingon swear words S.K. and I had looked up in sixth grade. Tracking deer was a terrible idea. I could be playing paintball.

I flipped to my favorite scene.

"Gatsby believed in that green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther... And one fine morning— So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the—"

I heard a loud crunch, and my eyes leapt from the page. Blitz! The herd's largest male had a star-shaped scar across his shoulder and a weathered-looking coat that made him look grandfatherly. He stood by a holly bush ten or fifteen yards away, sniffing the air, his nostrils snorting out puffs of steam. Right behind him was Madonna, the alpha female, and then Brutus, a younger male who sometimes challenged Blitz. Soon they were all there, including little Ashlyn, one of the youngest fawns: my target.

Crap!

I should've been crouching, but I hadn't expected them until closer to four. Since there was no way I could sight Ashlyn—or any of them—from my spot flat on my butt, I stood slowly and ducked through the bridge's two rail-ropes, rising into a sort of squirrel-eating-nut position, with my arms up near my face and my feet positioned on the edge of the cedar planks. A lesser woodswoman might have fallen, or scared the deer, but I'd been doing this for years.

My fingers folded, steady, around the handle of the gun. I leaned my head down, peering through the sight. A breeze rocked the bridge; the rope above my head brushed against the top of my hair. My body felt pinched. Stiff. And then, finally, I had her. Ashlyn side-stepped, her small flank bumping into teenage Aiden's long, strong throat. Aiden strode forward, and there!

In the moment that the dart shot out, I felt a rush of pure elation. As it sailed toward little Ashlyn, I watched the frozen herd, processing the milliseconds till the dart would hit, Ashlyn would fall, the rest would bolt.

But that's not how it happened.

As my breath puffed out, creating a pale cloud that lent the scene a gauzy haze, I felt a bite of what can only be described as shock. My limbs and torso locked; my lungs went still. There was a flash of golden light, like a solar flare, except for one second it was all there was, all there ever would be.

Then it receded, twisting the trees' shadows, mangling the forest floor. The creek spilled forth on fast forward. My blood boomed like a gunshot in my ears.

I searched for Ashlyn's body, but she wasn't there. A boy was.

Help Ella James plot her next book – a shapeshifter romance – at ellajamesbooks.blogspot.com