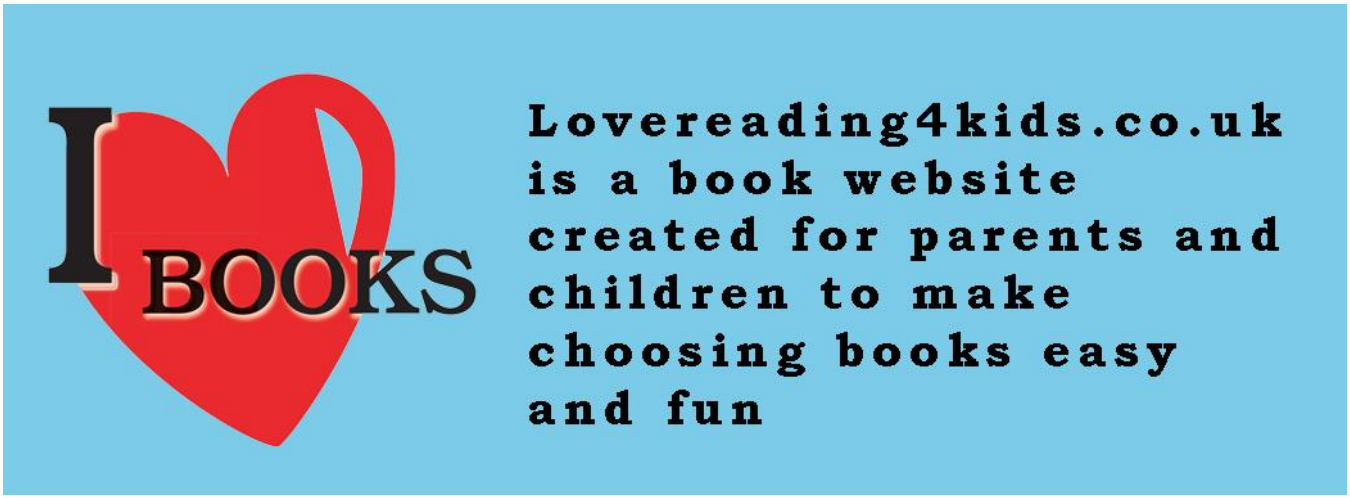

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PROLOGUE

November 2118

THE SOUNDS OF laughter and music were dying down on the thousandth floor, the party breaking up by bits and pieces as even the rowdiest guests finally stumbled into the elevators and down to their homes. The floor-to-ceiling windows were squares of velvety darkness, though in the distance the sun was quietly rising, the skyline turning ocher and pale pink and a soft, shimmering gold.

And then a scream cut abruptly through the silence as a girl fell toward the ground, her body falling ever faster through the cool predawn air.

In just three minutes, the girl would collide with the unforgiving cement of East Avenue. But now—her hair whipped up like a banner, the silk dress snapping around the curves of her body, her bright red mouth frozen in a perfect *O* of shock—now, in this instant, she was more beautiful than she had ever been.

They say that before death, people's lives flash before their

eyes. But as the ground rushed ever faster toward her, the girl could think only of the past few hours, the path she'd taken that ended here. If only she hadn't talked to him. If only she hadn't been so foolish. If only she hadn't gone up there in the first place.

When the dock monitor found what remained of her body and shakily pinged in a report of the incident, all he knew was that the girl was the first person to fall from the Tower in its twenty-five years. He didn't know who she was, or how she'd gotten outside.

He didn't know whether she'd fallen, or been pushed, or whether—crushed by the weight of unspoken secrets—she'd decided to jump.

AVERY

Two months earlier

"I HAD A great time tonight," Zay Wagner said as he walked Avery Fuller to the door of her family's penthouse. They'd been down at the New York Aquarium on the 830th floor, dancing in the soft glow of the fish tanks and familiar faces. Not that Avery cared much about the aquarium. But as her friend Eris always said, a party was a party, right?

"Me too." Avery tilted her bright blond head toward the retinal scanner, and the door unlocked. She offered Zay a smile. "Night."

He reached for her hand. "I was thinking maybe I could come in? Since your parents are away and everything . . ."

"I'm sorry," Avery mumbled, hiding her annoyance with a fake yawn. He'd been finding excuses to touch her all night; she should have seen this coming. "I'm exhausted."

"Avery." Zay dropped her hand and took a step back, running his fingers through his hair. "We've been doing this for weeks now. Do you even *like* me?"

Avery opened her mouth, then fell silent. She had no idea what to say.

Something flickered over Zay's expression—irritation? confusion? "Got it. I'll see you later." He retreated to the elevator, then turned back, his eyes traveling over her once more. "You looked really beautiful tonight," he added. The elevator doors closed behind him with a click.

Avery sighed and stepped into the grand entryway of her apartment. Back before she was born, when the Tower was under construction, her parents had bid aggressively to get this place—the entire top floor, with the only two-story foyer in the entire structure. They were so proud of this entryway, but Avery hated it: the hollow way it made her footsteps echo, the glinting mirrors on every surface. She couldn't look anywhere without seeing her reflection.

She kicked off her heels and walked barefoot toward her room, leaving the shoes in the middle of the hallway. Someone would pick them up tomorrow, one of the bots, or Sarah, if she actually showed up on time.

Poor Zay. Avery did like him: he was funny in a loud, fizzy way that made her laugh. But she just didn't feel anything when they kissed.

But the only boy Avery *did* want to kiss was the one she never, ever could.

She stepped into her room and heard the soft hum as the room comp whizzed to life, scanning her vitals and adjusting the temperature accordingly. An ice water appeared on the table next to her antique four-poster bed—probably because of the champagne still turning in her empty stomach, though Avery didn't bother asking. After Atlas skipped town, she'd disabled the voice function on the comp. He'd been the one to set it on the British accent and name it Jenkins. Talking to Jenkins without him was too depressing.

Zay's words echoed in her head. *You looked really beautiful tonight.* He was just trying to give her a compliment, of course; he couldn't have known how much Avery hated that word. All her life she'd been hearing how beautiful she was—from teachers, boys, her parents. By now the phrase had lost all meaning. Atlas, her adopted brother, was the only one who knew better than to compliment her.

The Fullers had spent years and a great deal of money conceiving Avery. She wasn't sure how expensive she'd actually been to make, though she guessed her value at slightly below that of their apartment. Her parents, who were both of middling height with ordinary looks and thinning brown hair, had flown in the world's leading researcher from Switzerland to help mine their genetic material. Somewhere in the million combinations of their very average DNA, they found the single possibility that led to Avery.

She wondered, sometimes, how she would've turned out if her parents had made her naturally, or just screened for diseases like most people on the upper floors. Would she have inherited her mom's skinny shoulders, or her father's big teeth? Not that it mattered. Pierson and Elizabeth Fuller had paid for *this* daughter, with honey-colored hair and long legs and deep blue eyes, her dad's intelligence, and her mom's quick wit. Atlas always joked that stubbornness was her one imperfection.

Avery wished that was the only thing wrong with her.

She shook out her hair, yanked it into a loose bun, and walked purposefully from her room. In the kitchen she swung open the pantry door, already reaching for the hidden handle to the mech panel. She'd found it years ago during a game of hide-and-seek with Atlas. She wasn't even sure whether her parents knew about it; it wasn't as if they ever set foot in here.

Avery pushed the metal panel inward, and a ladder swung

down into the narrow pantry space. Clutching the skirts of her ivory silk gown with both hands, she folded herself into the crawl space and started up, counting the rungs instinctively in Italian as she did, *uno, due, tre*. She wondered if Atlas had spent any time in Italy this year, if he'd even gone to Europe at all.

Balancing on the top rung, she reached to release the trapdoor and stepped eagerly into the wind-whipped darkness.

Beneath the deafening roar of the wind, Avery heard the rumbling of various machines on the roof around her, huddled under their weatherproof boxes or photovoltaic panels. Her bare feet were cold on the metal slabs of the platform. Steel supports arced from each corner, joining overhead to form the Tower's iconic spire.

It was a clear night, no clouds in the air to dampen her eyelashes or bead into moisture on her skin. The stars glittered like crushed glass against the dark vastness of the night sky. If anyone knew she was up here, she'd be grounded for life. Exterior access over the 150th floor was forbidden; all the terraces above that level were protected from the high-speed winds by heavy panes of polyethylene glass.

Avery wondered if anyone had ever set foot up here besides her. There were safety railings along one side of the roof, presumably in case maintenance workers came up, but to her knowledge, no one ever had.

She'd never told Atlas. It was one of only two secrets she had kept from him. If he found out, he would make sure she didn't come back, and Avery couldn't bear the thought of giving this up. She loved it here—loved the wind battering her face and tangling her hair, bringing tears to her eyes, howling so loud that it drowned out her own wild thoughts.

She stepped closer to the edge, relishing the twist of vertigo in her stomach as she gazed out over the city, the monorails curving through the air below like fluorescent snakes. The horizon

seemed impossibly far. She could see from the lights of New Jersey in the west to the streets of the Sprawl in the south, to Brooklyn in the east, and farther, the pewter gleam of the Atlantic.

And beneath her bare feet lay the biggest structure on earth, a whole world unto itself. How strange that there were millions of people below her at this very moment, eating, sleeping, dreaming, touching. Avery blinked, feeling suddenly and acutely alone. They were strangers, all of them, even the ones she knew. What did she care about them, or about herself, or about anything, really?

She leaned her elbows on the railing and shivered. One wrong move could send her over. Not for the first time, she wondered how it would feel, falling two and a half miles. She imagined it would be strangely peaceful, the feeling of weightlessness as she reached terminal velocity. And she'd be dead of a heart attack long before she hit the ground. Closing her eyes, she tilted forward, curling her silver-painted toes over the edge—just as the back of her eyelids lit up, her contacts registering an incoming ping.

She hesitated, a wave of guilty excitement crashing over her at the sight of his name. She'd done so well avoiding this all summer, distracting herself with the study abroad program in Florence, and more recently with Zay. But after a moment, Avery turned and clattered quickly back down the ladder.

"Hey," she said breathlessly when she was back in the pantry, whispering even though there was no one around to hear. "You haven't called for a while. Where are you?"

"Somewhere new. You'd love it here." His voice in her ear sounded the same, warm and rich as always. "How're things, Aves?"

And there it was: the reason Avery had to climb into a windstorm to escape her thoughts, the part of her engineering that had gone horribly wrong.

On the other end of the call was Atlas, her brother—and the reason she never wanted to kiss anyone else.

LEDA

AS THE COPTER crossed the East River into Manhattan, Leda Cole leaned forward, pressing her face against the flexiglass for a better look.

There was always something magical about this first glimpse of the city, especially now, with the windows of the upper floors blazing in the afternoon sun. Beneath the neochrome surface Leda caught flashes of color where the elevators shot past, the veins of the city pumping its lifeblood up and down. It was the same as ever, she thought, utterly modern and yet somehow timeless. Leda had seen countless pics of the old New York skyline, the one people always romanticized. But compared to the Tower she thought it looked jagged and ugly.

"Glad to be home?" her mom asked carefully, glancing at her from across the aisle. Leda gave a curt nod, not bothering to answer. She'd barely spoken to her parents since they'd picked

her up from rehab earlier this morning. Or really, since the incident back in July that had sent her there.

"Can we order Miatza tonight? I've been craving a dodo burger for weeks," her brother, Jamie, said, in a clear attempt to cheer her up. Leda ignored him. Jamie was only eleven months older, about to start his senior year, but he and Leda weren't all that close. Probably because they were nothing alike.

With Jamie everything was simple and straightforward, and he never seemed to worry that much at all. He and Leda didn't even *look* alike—where Leda was dark and spritely like their mom, Jamie's skin was almost as pale as their dad's, and despite Leda's best efforts he always looked sloppy. Right now he was sporting a wiry beard that he'd apparently spent the summer growing.

"Whatever Leda wants," Leda's dad replied. Sure, because letting her choose their takeout would make up for everything.

"I don't care." Leda glanced down at her wrist. Two tiny puncture wounds, remnants of the monitor bracelet that had clung to her all summer, were the only evidence of her time at Silver Cove. Which had been located perversely far from the ocean, in central Nevada.

Not that Leda could really blame her parents. If she'd walked in on the scene they'd witnessed back in July, she would have sent her to rehab too. She'd been an utter mess when she arrived there: vicious and angry, hyped up on xenperheidren and who knew what else. It had taken a full day of what the other girls at Silver Cove called "happy juice"—a potent IV drip of sedatives and dopamine—before she even agreed to speak with the doctors.

As the drugs seeped slowly from Leda's system, though, the acrid taste of her resentment had begun to fade. Shame flushed over her instead: a sticky, uncomfortable shame. She'd always promised herself that she would remain in control, that she

wouldn't be one of those pathetic addicts they showed in the health class holos at school. Yet there she was, with an IV drip taped into her vein.

"You okay?" one of the nurses had said, watching her expression.

Never let them see you cry, Leda had reminded herself, blinking back tears. "Of course," she managed, her voice steady.

Eventually Leda did find a sort of peace at rehab: not with her worthless psych doctor, but in meditation. She spent almost every morning there, sitting cross-legged and repeating the mantras that Guru Vashmi intoned. *May my actions be purposeful. I am my own greatest ally. I am enough in myself.* Occasionally Leda would open her eyes and glance around through the lavender smoke at the other girls in the yoga tepee. They all had a haunted, hunted look about them, as if they'd been chased here and were too afraid to leave. *I'm not like them*, Leda had told herself, squaring her shoulders and closing her eyes again. She didn't need the drugs, not the way those girls did.

Now they were only a few minutes from the Tower. Sudden anxiety twisted in Leda's stomach. Was she ready for this—ready to come back here and face everything that had sent her into a tailspin in the first place?

Not everything. Atlas was still gone.

Closing her eyes, Leda muttered a few words signaling her contacts to open her inbox, which she'd been checking nonstop since she left rehab this morning and got service again. Three thousand accumulated messages instantly pinged in her ears, invitations and vid-alerts cascading over one another like musical notes. The rumble of attention was oddly soothing.

At the top of the queue was a new message from Avery. *When are you back?*

Every summer, Leda's family forced her to come on their annual visit "home" to Podunk, middle-of-nowhere Illinois. "Home is New York," Leda would always protest, but her parents ignored her. Leda honestly didn't even understand why her parents *wanted* to keep visiting year after year. If she'd done what they did—moved from Danville to New York as newlyweds, right when the Tower was built, and slowly worked their way up until they could afford to live in the coveted upper floors—she wouldn't have looked back.

Yet her parents were determined to return to their hometown every year and stay with Leda and Jamie's grandparents, in a tech-dark house stocked with nothing but soy butter and frozen meal packets. Leda had actually enjoyed it back when she was a kid and it felt like an adventure. As she got older, though, she started begging to stay behind. She dreaded being around her cousins, with their tacky mass-produced clothing and eerie contactless pupils. But no matter how much she protested, she never could worm her way out of going. Until this year.

I'm back now! Leda replied, saying the message aloud and nodding to send it. Part of her knew she should tell Avery about Silver Cove: they'd talked a lot in rehab about accountability, and asking friends for help. But the thought of telling Avery made Leda clutch at the seat beneath her until her knuckles were white. She couldn't do it; couldn't reveal that kind of weakness to her perfect best friend. Avery would be polite about it, of course, but Leda knew that on some level she would judge her, would always look at Leda differently. And Leda couldn't handle that.

Avery knew a little of the truth: that Leda had started taking xenperheidren occasionally, before exams, to sharpen her thinking . . . and that a few times she'd taken some stronger stuff, with Cord and Rick and the rest of that crowd. But Avery had

no idea how bad it had gotten toward the end of last year, after the Andes—and she definitely didn't know the truth about this summer.

They pulled up to the Tower. The copter swayed drunkenly for a moment at the entrance to the seven-hundredth-floor helipad; even with stabilizers, it still faltered in the gale-force winds that whipped around the Tower. Then it made a final push and came to a rest inside the hangar. Leda unfolded herself from her seat and clattered down the staircase after her parents. Her mom was already on a call, probably muttering about a deal gone bad.

"Leda!" A blond whirlwind hurtled forward to engulf her in a hug.

"Avery." Leda smiled into her friend's hair, gently disentangling herself. She took a step back and looked up—and faltered momentarily, her old insecurities rushing back. Seeing Avery again was always a shock to the system. Leda tried not to let it bother her, but sometimes she couldn't help thinking how unfair it was. Avery already had the perfect life, up in the thousandth-floor penthouse. Did she really have to *be* perfect too? Seeing Avery next to the Fullers, Leda could never quite believe that she'd been created from their DNA.

It sucked sometimes, being best friends with the girl too flawless to come from nature. Leda, on the other hand, probably came from a night of tequila shots on her parents' anniversary.

"Want to get out of here?" Avery asked, pleading.

"Yes," Leda said. She would do anything for Avery, although this time she didn't really need to be coaxed.

Avery turned to embrace Leda's parents. "Mr. Cole! Mrs. Cole! Welcome home." Leda watched as they laughed and hugged her back, opening up like flowers in sunlight. No one was immune to Avery's spell.

"Can I steal your daughter?" Avery asked, and they nodded.

"Thanks. I'll have her home by dinner!" Avery called out, her arm already in Leda's, tugging her insistently toward the seven-hundredth-floor thoroughfare.

"Wait a sec." Next to Avery's crisp red skirt and cropped shirt, Leda's end-of-rehab outfit—a plain gray T-shirt and jeans—looked positively drab. "I want to change if we're going out."

"I was thinking we'd just go to the park?" Avery blinked rapidly, her pupils darting back and forth as she summoned a hover. "A bunch of the girls are hanging out there, and everyone wants to see you. Is that okay?"

"Of course," Leda said automatically, shoving aside the prickle of annoyance she felt that they weren't hanging out one-on-one.

They walked out the helipad's double doors and into the thoroughfare, a massive transportation hub that spanned several city blocks. The ceilings overhead glowed a bright cerulean. To Leda, they seemed just as beautiful as anything she'd seen on her afternoon hikes at Silver Cove. But Leda wasn't the type to look for beauty in nature. *Beauty* was a word she reserved for expensive jewelry, and dresses, and Avery's face.

"So tell me about it," Avery said in that direct way of hers, as they stepped onto the carbon-composite sidewalks that lined the silver hover paths. Cylindrical snackbots hummed past on enormous wheels, selling dehydrated fruit and coffee pods.

"What?" Leda tried to snap to attention. Hovers streamed down the street to her left, their movements darting and coordinated like a school of fish, colored green or red depending on whether they were free. She instinctively moved a little closer to Avery.

"Illinois. Was it as bad as usual?" Avery's eyes went distant. "Hover call," she said under her breath, and one of the vehicles darted out of the pack.

"You want to hover all the way to the park?" Leda asked,

dodging the question, trying to sound normal. She'd forgotten the sheer volume of *people* here—parents dragging their children, businesspeople talking loudly into their contacts, couples holding hands. It felt overwhelming after the curated calm of rehab.

"You're back, it's a special occasion!" Avery exclaimed.

Leda took a deep breath and smiled just as their hover pulled up. It was a narrow two-seater with a plush eggshell interior, floating several centimeters above the ground thanks to the magnetic propulsion bars in its floor. Avery took the seat across from Leda and keyed in their destination, sending the hover on its way.

"Maybe next year they'll let you miss it. And then you and I can travel together," Avery went on as the hover dropped into one of the Tower's vertical corridors. The yellow track lighting on the tunnel walls danced in strange patterns across her cheekbones.

"Maybe." Leda shrugged. She wanted to change the subject. "You're insanely tan, by the way. That's from Florence?"

"Monaco. Best beaches in the world."

"Not better than your grandmother's house in Maine." They'd spent a week there after freshman year, lying outside in the sun and sneaking sips of Grandma Lasserre's port wine.

"True. There weren't even any cute lifeguards in Monaco," Avery said with a laugh.

Their hover slowed, then began to move horizontally as it turned onto 307. Normally coming to a floor so low would count as serious downsliding, but visits to Central Park were an exception. As they pulled to a stop at the north-northeast park entrance, Avery turned to Leda, her deep blue eyes suddenly serious. "I'm glad you're back, Leda. I missed you this summer."

"Me too," Leda said quietly.

She followed Avery through the park entrance, past the famous cherry tree that had been reclaimed from the original

Central Park. A few tourists were leaning on the fence that surrounded it, taking snaps and reading the tree's history on the interactive touch screen alongside it. There was nothing else left of the original park, which lay beneath the Tower's foundations, far below their feet.

They turned toward the hill where Leda already knew their friends would be. Avery and Leda had discovered this spot together in seventh grade; after a great deal of experimentation, they'd concluded it was the best place to soak in the UV-free rays of the solar lamp. As they walked, the spectragrass along the path shifted from mint green to a soft lavender. A holographic cartoon gnome ran through a park on their left, followed by a line of squealing children.

"Avery!" Risha was the first to catch sight of them. The other girls, all reclining on brightly colored beach towels, glanced up and waved. "And Leda! When did you get back?"

Avery plopped in the center of the group, tucking a strand of flaxen hair behind one ear, and Leda settled down next to her. "Just now. I'm straight from the copter," she said, pulling her mom's vintage sunglasses out of her bag. She could have put her contacts on light-blocking mode, of course, but the glasses were sort of her signature. She'd always liked how they made her expression unreadable.

"Where's Eris?" she wondered aloud, not that she particularly missed her. But you could usually count on Eris to show up for tanning.

"Probably shopping. Or with Cord," said Ming Jiaozu, a suppressed bitterness in her tone.

Leda said nothing, feeling caught off guard. She hadn't seen anything about Eris and Cord on the feeds when she checked this morning. Then again, she could never really keep up with Eris, who'd dated—or at least messed around with—nearly half

the boys and girls in their class, some of them more than once. But Eris was Avery's oldest friend, and came from old family money, and because of that she got away with pretty much anything.

"How was your summer, Leda?" Ming went on. "You were with your family in Illinois, right?"

"Yeah."

"That must have been *awful*, being in the middle of nowhere like that." Ming's tone was sickly sweet.

"Well, I survived," Leda said lightly, refusing to let the other girl provoke her. Ming knew how much Leda hated talking about her parents' background. It was a reminder that she wasn't from this world the way the rest of them were, that she'd moved up in seventh grade from midTower suburbia.

"What about you?" Leda asked. "How was Spain? Did you hang out with any of the locals?"

"Not really."

"Funny. From the feeds, it looked like you made some really *close* friends." In her mass-download on the plane earlier, Leda had seen a few snaps of Ming with a Spanish boy, and she could tell that something had happened between them—from their body language, the lack of captions under the snaps, most of all from the flush that was now creeping up Ming's neck.

Ming fell silent. Leda allowed herself a small smile. When people pushed her buttons, she pushed back.

"Avery," Jess McClane said, leaning forward. "Did you end things with Zay? I ran into him earlier, and he seemed down."

"Yeah," Avery said slowly. "I mean, I think so? I do like him, but . . ." she trailed off halfheartedly.

"Oh my god, Avery. You really should just *do* it, and get it over with!" Jess exclaimed. The gold bangles on her wrists glimmered in the solar panel's light. "What are you waiting for, exactly? Or

maybe I should say, *who* are you waiting for?"

"Give it a rest, Jess. You can't exactly talk," Leda snapped. People always made comments like that to Avery, because there was nothing else to really criticize her about. But it made even less sense coming from Jess, who was a virgin too.

"As a matter of fact, I can," Jess said meaningfully.

A chorus of squeals erupted at that—"Wait, you and Patrick?" "When?" "Where?"—and Jess grinned, clearly eager to share the details. Leda leaned back, pretending to listen. As far as the girls all knew, she was a virgin too. She hadn't told anyone the truth, not even Avery. And she never would.

It had happened in January, on the annual ski trip to Catyan. Their families had been going for years: at first just the Fullers and the Andertons, and then once Leda and Avery became such good friends, the Coles too. The Andes were the best skiing left on earth; even Colorado and the Alps relied almost exclusively on snow machines these days. Only in Chile, on the highest peaks in the Andes, was there enough natural snow for true skiing anymore.

The second day of the trip, they were all out drone-skiing—Avery, Leda, Atlas, Jamie, Cord, even Cord's older brother, Brice—falling from the jump seats of their individual ski-drones to land on the powder, cut a line through the trees, and reach back up to grab their drones before the drop-off at the glacier's edge. Leda wasn't as strong a skier as the others, but she'd swallowed an adrenaline drop on the ride up and was feeling good, almost as good as when she stole the *really* good stuff from her mom. She followed Atlas through the trees, trying her best to keep up, loving the way the wind clawed at the contours of her polydown suit. She could hear nothing but the swish of her skis through the snow, and, beneath it, the deep, hollow sound of emptiness. It struck her that they were tempting fate, hurtling through the

paper-thin air up there on a glacier, at the very edge of the sky.

That was when Avery had screamed.

Everything afterward was a blur. Leda fumbled in her glove to push the red emergency button that would summon her ski-drone, but Avery was already being scooped up a few meters away. Her leg jutted out at a garish angle.

By the time they got back to the hotel's penthouse suite, Avery was already on a jet home. She would be fine, Mr. Fuller assured them; she just needed her knee re-fused, and he wanted her to see experts in New York. Leda knew what that meant. Avery would visit Everett Radson afterward to have the surgery microlasered. God forbid there be the slightest trace of a scar on her perfect body.

Later that night the kids were all in the hot tub on the deck, passing around frosted bottles of whiskeycream, toasting to Avery, the Andes, the snow that had started falling. As it started to come down ever faster, the others eventually grumbled in protest and retreated to bed. But Leda, who was sitting next to Atlas, stayed behind. He hadn't moved yet either.

She'd wanted Atlas for years, ever since she and Avery became friends, since the moment she first met him at Avery's apartment, when he walked in on them singing Disney songs and she turned bright red with embarrassment. But Leda had never really thought she had a chance with him. He was two years older, and besides, he was Avery's brother. Until now, as everyone was clambering out of the hot tub and she hesitated, wondering if maybe, possibly . . . She felt hyperaware of where her knee brushed Atlas's under the water, sending tingles up her entire left side.

"Want some?" he murmured, passing her the bottle.

"Thanks." Leda forced herself to look away from his eyelashes, where snowflakes were clumping like tiny liquid stars.

She took a long sip of the whiskeycream. It was smooth, sweet like a dessert, with an aftertaste that burned in her throat. She felt light-headed, dizzy from the heat of the hot tub, of Atlas so close to her. Maybe the adrenaline drop hadn't worn off yet, or maybe it was just her own raw excitement that made her feel strangely reckless.

"Atlas," she said softly. When he turned to her, an eyebrow raised, she leaned forward and kissed him.

After a moment's hesitation he kissed her back, his hands reaching up into the heavy curls of her hair, dusted with snow. Leda lost all sense of time. At some point her bikini top came off, and her bottoms too—well, it wasn't like she was wearing much clothing to begin with—and Atlas was whispering "Are you sure?" Leda nodded, her heart hammering. Of course she was sure. She'd never been so sure of anything.

The next morning she nearly skipped into the kitchen, her hair still damp from the hot tub's steam, the memory of Atlas's touch carved indelibly on her skin, like an inktat. But he was gone.

He'd taken the first jet back to New York. To check on Avery, his dad said. Leda nodded coolly, but inside she felt sick. She knew the truth, why Atlas had really left. He was avoiding her. *Fine*, she thought, anger swirling in to cover the pang of loss; she would show him. She wouldn't care either.

Except that Leda never got a chance to confront Atlas. He went missing later that week, before classes resumed, even though it should have been the spring semester of his senior year. There was a brief and frantic search for him, limited only to Avery's family. It ended within hours, when his parents learned he was okay.

Now, almost a year later, Atlas's disappearance was old news. His parents publicly laughed it off as a youthful indulgence: Leda

had heard them at countless cocktail parties, claiming that he was traveling the world on a gap year, that it had been their idea all along. That was their story and they were sticking to it, but Avery had told Leda the truth. The Fullers had no idea where Atlas was, and when—or if—he would ever come back. He called Avery periodically to check in, but always with the location heavily encrypted, and by then he was about to move on anyway.

Leda never told Avery about that night in the Andes. She didn't know how to bring it up in the wake of Atlas's disappearance, and the longer she kept it to herself, the more of a secret it became. It ached like a bruise, the realization that the only boy she'd ever cared about had literally *run away* after sleeping with her. Leda tried to stay angry; feeling angry seemed safer than letting herself feel hurt. But even the anger wasn't enough to quiet the pain that pounded dully through her at the thought of him.

Which was how she'd ended up in rehab.

"Leda, will you come with me?" Avery's voice broke into her thoughts. Leda blinked. "To my dad's office, to pick something up," Avery repeated. Her eyes were wide with meaning; Avery's dad's office was the excuse they'd been using for years, when one of them wanted to ditch whoever they were with.

"Doesn't your dad have messenger bots for that?" Ming asked.

Leda ignored her. "Of course," she said to Avery, standing up and brushing bits of grass off her jeans. "Let's go."

They waved good-bye and started on the path toward the nearest transport station, where the clear vertical column of the express C line shot upward. The sides were startlingly transparent; Leda could see inside to a group of elderly women whose heads were tipped together in conversation, and a toddler picking his nose.

"Atlas pinged me last night," Avery whispered as they moved to stand on the upTower platform.

Leda stiffened. She knew that Avery had stopped telling her parents about Atlas's calls. She said it only upset them. But there was something weird about the fact that Avery didn't share this with anyone except Leda.

Then again, Avery had always been oddly protective of Atlas. Whenever he dated anyone, she invariably acted polite, but a little aloof—as if she didn't quite approve, or thought that Atlas had made a mistake. Leda wondered if it had to do with Atlas being adopted, if Avery worried he was somehow more vulnerable, because of the life he'd come from, and felt an impulse to protect him as a result.

"Really?" she asked, keeping her voice steady. "Could you tell where he was?"

"I heard a lot of loud voices in the background. Probably a bar somewhere." Avery shrugged. "You know how Atlas is."

No, I really don't. Maybe if she understood Atlas, Leda would be able to make sense of her own confused feelings. She gave her friend's arm a squeeze.

"Anyway," Avery said with forced brightness, "he'll come home soon, when he's ready. Right?"

She looked at Leda with a question in her eyes. For a moment, Leda was struck by how much Avery reminded her of Atlas. They weren't related by blood, and yet they had the same white-hot intensity. When they turned the full force of their attention on you, it was as blinding as looking into the sun.

Leda shifted uncomfortably. "Of course," she said. "He'll come back soon."

She prayed it wasn't true, and at the same time, she couldn't help hoping it was.

RYLIN

THE NEXT EVENING, Rylin Myers stood at the door to her apartment, struggling to wave her ID ring over the scanner while balancing a bag of groceries in one arm and a half-full energy drink in the other. Of course, she thought as she kicked shamelessly at the door, this wouldn't be a problem if they had a retinal scanner, or those glitzy computerized lenses that the highlier kids all wore. But no one could afford anything like that where Rylin lived, here on 32.

Just as she was drawing back her leg to kick again, the door opened. "Finally," Rylin muttered, shoving past her fourteen-year-old sister.

"If you got your ID ring fixed like I keep telling you to, this wouldn't happen," Chrissa quipped. "Then again, what would you say? 'Sorry, officers, I keep using my ID ring to open beer bottles, and now it's stopped working'?"

Rylin ignored her. Taking a long sip of her energy drink, she

heaved the grocery bag onto the counter and tossed her sister a box of veggie-rice. "Can you put this stuff away? I'm running late." The Ifty—Intra Floor Transit system—was down again, so she'd been forced to walk all twenty blocks from the lift stop to their apartment.

Chrissa looked up. "You're going out *tonight*?" She'd inherited their mom's soft Korean features, her delicate nose and high arched brow, while Rylin looked much more like their square-jawed dad. But they'd both somehow gotten their mom's bright green eyes, which glowed against their skin like beryls.

"Um, yeah. It's Saturday," Rylin answered, purposefully ignoring her sister's meaning. She didn't want to talk about what had happened on this day a year ago—the day their mom died and their entire world fell apart. She would never forget how Child Services came to their house that very night, while the girls were still holding each other crying, to tell them about the foster system.

Rylin had listened to them for a while, Chrissa's head turned into her shoulder as she kept on sobbing. Her sister was smart, really smart, and good enough at volleyball to have a serious shot at a college scholarship. But Rylin knew enough about foster care to know what it would do to them. Especially to Chrissa.

She would do anything to keep this family together, no matter what it cost her.

The very next day she'd gone to the nearest family court and declared legal adulthood, so that she could start working her terrible job at the monorail stop full-time. What other choice did she have? Even now, they were barely keeping up—Rylin had just gotten yet another warning notice from their landlord; they were always at least a month behind on rent. Not to mention all their mom's hospital bills. Rylin had been trying to pay those down for the last year, but at this interest rate the mountain of debt was

actually starting to *grow*. Sometimes Rylin felt like she'd never be free of it.

This was their life now, and it wasn't changing anytime soon.

"Rylin. Please?"

"I'm already late," Rylin said, retreating into her roped-off section of their tiny bedroom; thinking about what she would wear, about the fact that she didn't have to go into work for a whole thirty-six hours, about anything but the reproachful look in her sister's green eyes, which looked so painfully like their mom's.

Rylin and her boyfriend, Hiral, clattered down the steps of the Tower's Exit 12. "There they are," Rylin muttered, raising a hand against the glare of the sun. Their friends were gathered at the usual meeting place, a hot metal bench across the street at 127th and Morningside.

She glanced at Hiral. "Are you sure you don't have *anything* with you?" she asked again. She wasn't exactly thrilled about the fact that Hiral had started selling—at first just to their friends, then on an even bigger level—but it had been a long week, and she was still on edge after her conversation with Chrissa. She could really use a hit, of relaxants or halluci-lighter, anything to silence the thoughts that were cycling endlessly through her brain.

Hiral shook his head. "Sorry. Cleared my whole inventory this week." He glanced at her. "Everything okay?"

Rylin was quiet. Hiral reached for her hand, and she let him take it. His palms were rough with work, and there were black circles of grease underneath his fingernails. Hiral had dropped out of school last year to work as a liftie, repairing the Tower's massive elevators from the inside. He spent his days suspended hundreds of meters in the air like a human spider.

"Ry!" her best friend, Lux, exclaimed, rushing over. Her hair, cut in jagged bangs, was ash-blond this week. "You made it! I was worried you weren't going to come."

"Sorry. Got caught up," Rylin apologized.

Andrés snorted. "Had to get a little *transmission* in before the concert?" He made a crude gesture with his hands.

Lux rolled her eyes and pulled Rylin into a hug. "How are you holding up?" she murmured.

"Fine." Rylin didn't know what else to say. She felt a confused pang of gratefulness that Lux had remembered what day it was, mingled with irritation at the reminder. She caught herself toying with her mom's old necklace and quickly let go of it. Hadn't she come out precisely to *avoid* thinking about her mom?

Shaking her head, Rylin let her gaze roam over the rest of the group. Andrés was leaning back on the bench, stubbornly wearing a leather jacket in spite of the heat. Hiral stood next to him, his deeply bronzed skin gleaming in the setting sun. And on the far side of the bench was Indigo, wearing a shirt that she'd barely managed to turn into a dress, and sky-high boots.

"Where's V?" Rylin asked.

"Providing the fun. Unless *you* were planning on bringing today?" Indigo said sarcastically.

"Just partaking, thanks," Rylin replied. Indigo rolled her eyes and went back to messaging on her tablet.

Rylin took plenty of illegal drugs, of course—they all did—but she drew the line at buying or selling. No one cared much about a few smoking teenagers, but the laws were harsher on dealers. If she ended up in jail, Chrissa would go straight to foster care. Rylin couldn't risk that.

Andrés glanced up from his tablet. "V's meeting us there. Let's go."

A blistering wind tossed a few stray pieces of trash along the

sidewalk. Rylin stepped over them, taking a deep, bracing breath. The air out here might be hot, but at least it wasn't the recycled, oxygen-heavy air of the Tower.

Across the street, Hiral was already crouched at the side of the Tower, sliding a blade beneath the edge of a steel panel and peeling it back. "All clear," he murmured. Their hands brushed as Rylin stepped into the opening, and they exchanged a look; then Rylin was stepping into the steel forest.

The sounds of outside instantly vanished, replaced by the low hum of voices and drugged-out laughter, and the whoosh of air cycling from the bottom of the Tower. They were in the underworld beneath the first floor; a strange, dark space of pipes and steel columns. Rylin and Lux walked softly through the shadows, nodding at the other groups as they passed. One cluster was gathered around the dim pink glow of a halluci-lighter. Another, half clothed and sprawled out on a pile of pillows, was clearly about to start an Oxytose orgy. Rylin saw the telltale gleam of the machine room door ahead, and started to walk a little faster.

"You can all go ahead and thank me now," came a voice from the shadows, and she almost jumped. *V.*

He wasn't as tall as Andrés, but V had to weigh at least twenty kilos more, and it was all muscle. His broad shoulders and arms were covered entirely in inktats, which danced across his body in a swirling chaos; shapes forming, breaking apart, and reforming elsewhere. Rylin winced at the thought of inking that much skin.

"Okay, guys." V reached into his bag and produced a stack of bright gold patches, each the size of Rylin's thumbnail. "Who's in for communals?"

"Holy shit," Lux exclaimed, laughing. "How did you score these?"

"Hell, yes!" Hiral high-fived Andrés.

"Seriously?" Rylin asked, her voice cutting through the celebrations. She didn't like communals. They induced a shared group high, which felt somehow invasive, like having sex with a bunch of strangers. The worst part was being unable to control the high, putting herself entirely in someone else's hands. "I thought we were smoking tonight," she said. She'd even brought her halluci-lighter, the tiny compact pipe that could be used for almost anything—darklights, crispies, and of course the hallucinogenic weed it had been created for.

"Scared, Myers?" V challenged, after a moment.

"I'm not *scared*." Rylin drew herself up to her full height and stared at V. "I just wanted to do something else."

Her tablet vibrated with an incoming message. She looked down to see a text from Chrissa. *I made Mom's baked apple bites*, she'd written. *In case you want to come home!*

V was watching her, an open challenge in his gaze. "Whatever," Rylin said under her breath. "Why the hell not?" She reached out to grab the patches in V's hand and slapped one on her inner arm, right by the elbow where her vein was close to the surface.

"That's what I thought," V said as the others began eagerly reaching for the patches.

They stepped into the machine room, and suddenly all Rylin could hear was the electronic music. It slammed angrily into her skull, obliterating any other thought. Lux grabbed her arm and began jumping hysterically, shouting something unintelligible.

"Who's ready to *party*?!" the DJ exclaimed from where he stood perched on a coolant tank, an amplifier spreading his voice throughout the room. The space, hot and close with cramped bodies, erupted in screams. "All right," he went on. "If you've got a gold, put it on now. Because I'm DJ Lowy, and I'm about to take you on the most insane ride of your life." The dim light

reflected off the sea of communal patches. Almost everyone here was patched up, Rylin realized. This would be intense.

"Three—" Lowy shouted, counting down. Lux gave an eager laugh and jumped higher on her tiptoes, trying to see over the crowd. Rylin glanced at V; his inktats were swirling even wilder than usual in the space surrounding his patch, as if his very skin knew what was about to happen.

"Two—" Most of the crowd had joined in the count. Hiral came to stand behind Rylin and wrapped his arms around her waist, resting his chin on her head. She leaned back into him and closed her eyes, bracing herself for the communals' activation.

"One!" The scream reverberated through the room. Lowy reached for the tablet hovering before him and flicked on the electromagnetic pulse, tuned to the frequency of the communals. Instantly all the patches in the room released waves of stimulants into the bloodstream of everyone wearing them. The ultimate synchronized high.

The music turned up and Rylin threw her hands into the air, joining the loud, seemingly endless scream. She could already feel the communal taking over her system. The world had realigned to the music, everything—the flashing of the lights overhead, her breathing, her heartbeat, *everyone's* heartbeats—timed perfectly with the deep, insistent pulse of the bass.

Don't you love this? Lux mouthed, or at least that's what it seemed like she said, though Rylin couldn't be sure. Already she was losing her grip on her thoughts. Chrissa and her text messages didn't matter, her job and her asshole boss didn't matter. Nothing mattered except this moment. She felt invincible, untouchable, like she would be this way forever: young and dancing and electric and alive.

Lights. A flask of something strong being passed to her. She

took a sip without tasting what it was. A touch on her hip—*Hiral*, she thought, pulling his hand closer in invitation. But then she saw Hiral a few rows forward, jumping and punching at the sky with Andrés. She spun around only to see V's face whirl up out of the darkness. He held up another gold patch, an eyebrow raised suggestively. Rylin shook her head. She wasn't even sure how she'd pay him back for the one she'd already taken.

But V was already peeling back the adhesive on the back side. "No charge," he whispered, as if reading her thoughts, or had she spoken them aloud? He reached down to sweep her hair back from her neck. "A little secret: The closer it is to your brain, the faster it kicks in."

Rylin closed her eyes, dazed, as the second wave of drugs snapped through her. It was a razor-sharp rush, setting all her nerves afire. She was dancing and somehow also floating when she sensed a vibration in her front pocket. She ignored it and kept jumping, but there it was again, drawing her painstakingly back into her awkward, physical body. Fumbling, she managed to grab her tablet. "Hello?" Rylin said, gasping as her breathing became irregular, no longer in time with the music.

"Rylin Myers?"

"What the—who is this?" She couldn't hear. The crowd was still buffeting her back and forth.

There was a pause, as if the speaker couldn't believe the question. "Cord Anderton," he said finally, and Rylin blinked in shock. Her mom had worked as a maid for the Andertons, back before she got sick. Dimly Rylin realized that she did recognize the voice, from the few times she'd been up there. But why the hell was Cord Anderton calling *her*?

"So, can you come work my party?"

"I don't . . . what are you talking about?" She tried to shout over the music, but it came out more like a rasp.

"I sent you a message. I'm throwing a party tonight." His voice was fast, impatient. "I need someone here—to keep everything clean, help with the caterers, all the stuff your mom used to do." Rylin flinched at the mention of her mom, but of course he couldn't see. "My usual help bailed last minute, but then I remembered you and looked you up. Do you want the job or not?"

Rylin wiped a bead of sweat from her brow. Who did Cord Anderton think he was, *summoning* her on a Saturday night? She opened her mouth to tell this rich, entitled asshole to shove the job right up his—

"I forgot," he added, "it pays two hundred nanos."

Rylin choked back her words. Two hundred nanodollars for just one night of dealing with drunk rich kids? "How soon do you need me there?"

"Oh, half an hour ago."

"I'm on my way," she said, the room still spinning. "But—"

"Great." Cord ended the ping.

With a herculean effort, Rylin pulled the patch from her arm, and then, wincing, ripped off the one on her neck. She glanced back at the others—Hiral was dancing, oblivious; Lux was wrapped around a stranger with her tongue down his throat; Indigo was sitting on Andrés's shoulders. She turned to go. V was still watching her, but Rylin didn't say good-bye. She just stepped out into the hot stickiness of the night, letting the used gold patches flutter slowly to the ground behind her.

ERIS

ERIS DODD-RADSON BURROWED deeper under her fluffy silk pillow, angry at the ringing that was playing incessantly in her eartennas. "Five more minutes," she mumbled. The ringing didn't stop. "I said snooze!" she snapped, before realizing that this wasn't her alarm. It was Avery's ringtone, which Eris had long ago set on full override, so that it would wake her up even when she was sleeping. "Accept ping," she mumbled.

"Are you on your way?" Avery's voice sounded in her ear, pitched louder than usual over the clamor of the party. Eris glanced at the time, illuminated in bright pink numbers in her lower left field of vision. Cord's party had started half an hour ago and she was still lying in bed, with no idea what to wear.

"Obviously." She was already halfway to her closet, shimmying out of her oversized T-shirt as she picked her way through discarded clothes and stray pillows. "I just—*ow!*" she yelped, clutching a stubbed toe.

"Oh my god. You're still home," Avery accused, but she was laughing. "What happened? Oversleep your beauty nap again?"

"I just like making everyone wait so they'll be that much more excited to see me," Eris answered.

"And by 'everyone,' you mean Cord."

"No, I mean everyone. Especially you, Avery," Eris said. "Don't go having too much fun without me, 'kay?"

"I promise. Flick me when you're on your way?" Avery said, and ended the ping.

Eris blamed her dad for this one. Her eighteenth birthday was in a few weeks, and today she'd had to visit the family attorney to start her trust fund paperwork. It was all excessively boring, signing countless documents with an official witness present, taking drug and DNA tests. She hadn't even understood all of it, except that if she signed everything, she'd be rich someday.

Eris's dad came from old money—his family had invented the magnetic repulsion technology that kept hovercrafts aloft. And Everett had only added to the already-massive fortune, by becoming the world's premier plastisurgeon. The only mistakes he'd ever made were two expensive divorces before he finally met Eris's mom, when he was forty and she was a twenty-five-year-old model. He didn't ever talk about those previous marriages, and since there were no children from either, Eris never asked about them. She didn't really like thinking about it, to be honest.

Stepping into her closet, she drew a circle on the mirrored wall, and it turned into a touch screen that lit up with her closet's full inventory. Every year Cord threw this back-to-school costume party, and every year there was a fierce and unspoken competition for best costume. She sighed and began sorting through her various options: the gold flapper dress, the faux-fur hood her mom had given her, a hot pink sequinned gown from last Halloween. None of it seemed right.

Screw it, she decided. Why was she trying to find a costume anyway? Wouldn't she stand out more without one?

"The black Alicia top," she announced to her closet, which spit the item into the output chute at the bottom. Eris pulled the top on over her lace bra and stepped into her favorite suede pants, which she knew made her ass look fantastic. She snapped a set of silver cuffs on her elbows and reached up to yank out her ponytail, letting her strawberry-blond hair fall around her shoulders in a wild tangle.

Biting her lip, she plopped down at her vanity and placed her hands on the hairstyler's two electropulsers. "Straight," she ordered, closing her eyes and bracing herself.

A tingle spread from her palms, up her arms, and into her scalp as the machine jolted her with a wave of electricity. The other girls at school always complained about the styler, but Eris secretly enjoyed the feeling: the hot, clean way it set all her nerves afire, almost like pain. When she looked up, her hair had fallen into straight layers around her face. She tapped at the screen of her vanity and closed her eyes as a fine spray of makeup misted over her. When she looked up again, eyeliner now brought out the strange and arresting amber flecks in her irises, and a blush softened her cheekbones, highlighting the smattering of freckles along her nose. But something was still missing.

Before she could second-guess herself, Eris was moving through the darkness of her parents' room and into her mom's closet. She felt for the jewelry safe and typed the passcode, which she'd figured out at age ten. Nestled inside, next to a colorful array of gemstones and a rope of thick black pearls, were her mom's stained glass earrings. The rare, old-fashioned kind of glass—not flexiglass, but the kind of glass that could actually break.

The earrings were exorbitantly expensive, hand-blown from the panes of an old church window. Eris's dad had bought them

at an auction, as a twentieth-anniversary present. Pushing aside her twinge of guilt, Eris reached up and screwed the delicate droplets into her ears.

She was almost at the front door when her dad called out from the living room. "Eris? Where are you headed?"

"Hey, Dad." She turned around, keeping one heeled bootie in the hallway so she could make a quick exit. Her dad was sitting in his favorite corner of the brown leather couch, reading something on his tablet, probably a medical journal or patient record. His thick hair was almost entirely gray, and his eyes were creased with worry lines, which he refused to surge away like most of Eris's friends' parents did. He said that patients found the lines reassuring. Eris secretly thought it was kind of cool of her dad, to insist on aging naturally.

"I'm going to a friend's party," she explained. Her dad glanced over her outfit, and Eris realized a second too late that she hadn't concealed the earrings. She discreetly tried to pull her hair forward to hide them, but Everett was already shaking his head. "Eris, you can't wear those," he said, sounding a little amused. "They're the most expensive thing in this apartment."

"That's an exaggeration, and you know it." Eris's mom sailed in from the kitchen wearing a scarlet evening dress, her hair piled atop her head in a cascade of curls. "Hey, sweetie," Caroline Dodd said, turning to her daughter. "Want some bubbly before you go? I'm about to open a bottle of that Montès rosé you like."

"The one from the vineyard where we swam in the pool?"

"The one with the 'Pool Closed' sign, you mean." A smile lifted up the corners of her dad's mouth. That had been a particularly ridiculous family trip. Eris's parents had let her drink the wine pairings at lunch, and it was so hot out that Eris and her mom kept trying to fan each other with their napkins the whole meal, then ended up sneaking, giggling, into a gated-off hotel pool and jumping in fully clothed.

"We never saw that sign!" Caroline laughed in protest and popped the bottle. The sound reverberated through the apartment. Eris took the outstretched glass with a shrug. It *was* her favorite.

"So whose party is it?" Caroline prompted.

"Cord's. And I'm already late . . ." Eris still hadn't told her mom about her and Cord. She shared almost everything with her mom, but never the hookup stuff.

"I believe it's called fashionably late," her dad added. "And you'll only be a minute later and just as fashionable once you put the earrings back."

"Oh, come on, Everett. What harm can she do?"

Eris's dad shook his head, giving in, as Eris had known he would. "All right, Caroline. If you aren't upset, then Eris can wear them."

"Outvoted again," Eris teased, and exchanged a knowing smile with her dad. He always joked about being the least powerful person in the apartment, outnumbered as he was by two highly opinionated women.

"Every time." Everett laughed.

"How could I say no when they look so gorgeous on you?" Caroline put her hands on Eris's shoulders and turned her around to face the massive antique mirror on the wall.

Eris looked like a younger version of her mom. The only tiny differences, aside from age, were the slight modifications Eris's dad had agreed to give her this spring—nothing major, just the insertion of the gold flecks in her eyes and the lasering on of a few freckles for texture. There was nothing else to be done for her, really. Eris's features were all her own, her full mouth and cute upturned nose and most of all her hair, a lustrous riot of color, copper and honey and strawberry and sunrise. Eris's hair was her greatest beauty, but then, there was nothing about her that wasn't beautiful, as she was well aware.

She gave her head an impatient toss and the earrings danced, catching all the glorious colors of her hair as if lit from within.

"Have fun tonight," Eris's mom said. Eris met her eyes in the mirror and smiled.

"Thanks. I'll take good care of these." She finished her champagne and set it on the table. "Love you," she said to both her parents on her way out. The earrings glowed against her hair like twin stars.

The downTower C lift was pulling up right as she walked into the station, which Eris considered a good sign. Maybe it was because she was named after a Greek goddess, but she'd always attributed an omen-like significance to even the smallest things. Last year there had been a smudge on her window that looked like a heart. She never reported it to outside maintenance, so it stayed that way for weeks, until the next rain day finally washed it away. She liked to imagine that it had brought her good luck.

Eris followed the crowds on board and edged toward the side of the lift. Normally she might have taken a hover, but she was running late and this was faster; and anyway, the C line had always been her favorite, with its transparent view panels. She loved watching the floors shoot past, light and shadow alternating with the heavy metal framework that separated each level, the crowds waiting for the local lifts blurring together into an indistinguishable stream of color.

Mere seconds later, the elevator pulled to a stop. Eris pushed past the swirl of activity around the express station, the waiting hovers and the newsfeed salesbots, and turned onto the main avenue. Like her, Cord lived on the expensive north-facing side of the Tower, with a view uncluttered by the buildings of midtown, or the Sprawl. His floor was slightly larger—the Tower narrowed as it got higher, ending in Avery's apartment, which was the only

thing on the top level—but she could feel the difference even in those sixteen floors. The streets were just as wide, lined with tiny grass plots and real trees, fed by discreetly hidden misters. The solar lamps overhead had dimmed to match the real sun, which was only visible from the outward-facing apartments. But the energy down here was somehow different, louder and a little more vibrant. Maybe it was thanks to the commercial space that lined the center avenue, even if it was only a coffee shop and a Brooks Brothers fitting room.

Eris reached Cord's street—really just the shadowed cul-de-sac that ended in the Andertons' front steps; no one else lived on this block. A dramatic *1A* was inscribed over the doorway, as if anyone needed reminding whose home this was. Like the rest of the world, Eris wondered why Cord had continued to live here after his parents died and his older brother, Brice, moved out. It was way too much space for one person.

Inside, the apartment was already crammed wall-to-wall with people, and growing warmer despite the ventilation system. Eris saw Maxton Feld in the enclosed greenhouse, trying to reprogram the hydration system to make it rain beer. She paused at the dining room, where someone had propped the table on hovercoasters for a game of floating pong, but didn't see Cord's telltale dark head in there either. And there was no one in the kitchen except a girl Eris didn't recognize, in a dark ponytail and formfitting jeans. Eris wondered idly who she was, just as the girl began stacking dishes and carrying them away. So Cord had a new maid—a maid who was already out of uniform. Eris still didn't understand why he paid for a maid; only people like the Fullers, or Eris's grandmother, had them anymore. Everyone else just bought all the various cleaning bots on the market and set them loose whenever things seemed dirty. But maybe that was the point: to pay for the human, un-automated-ness of it all.

What are you supposed to be? "Too cool for costumes"? "Oversleeper"? Avery flickered her.

I prefer "professional attention-getter," Eris replied, smiling as she glanced around the room.

Avery was at the living room windows, dressed in a simple white shift with a pair of holo-wings and a halo floating above her head. On anyone else it would look like a lame last-minute angel costume, but Avery was, of course, ethereal. Next to her stood Leda, in a black feathery thing, and Ming, who was wearing a stupid devil costume. She'd probably heard that Avery was being an angel and wanted to seem like they were a set. How pathetic. Eris didn't feel like talking to either girl, so she flickered Avery that she would be back and kept on looking for Cord.

They'd started hooking up this summer, when they had both been stuck in town. Eris had been a little worried at first—everyone else was jetting off to Europe or the Hamptons or the beaches in Maine, while she'd be stranded here in the city, interning at her dad's medical practice. It was the trade he'd insisted on in exchange for the surges he did last spring. "You need work experience," he'd said. As if she planned on working a day in her life. Still, Eris had agreed. She wanted the surges that badly.

And it was all just as boring as she'd expected, until the night she ran into Cord at Lightning Lounge. One thing led to another, and soon they were taking atomic shots, and walking out onto the enclosed balcony. It was there, pressed up against the enforced flexiglass, that they had kissed for the first time.

Now Eris could only wonder why it hadn't happened sooner. God knows she'd been around Cord for years, ever since her family moved back to New York when she was eight. They'd spent several years in Switzerland so her dad could study all the latest European surge techniques. Eris had attended first and second

grades at the American School of Lausanne, but when she came back—speaking a strange polyglot of French and English, with no understanding of a multiplication table—Berkeley Academy had gently suggested she repeat second grade.

She would never forget that first day back, when she'd walked into the lunchroom not knowing anyone in her new class. It was Cord who had slid into the seat beside her at her empty table. "Wanna see a cool zombie game?" he'd asked, and showed her how to set her contacts so the cafeteria food looked like brains. Eris had laughed so hard she'd almost snorted into her spaghetti.

That was two years before his parents died.

She found Cord in the game room, seated around the massive antique table with Drew Lawton and Joaquin Suarez, all of them holding real paper playing cards in their hands. It was one of Cord's weird quirks, how he insisted on playing Idleness with that old card set. He claimed that everyone looked too vacant when they played on contacts, sitting around a table but staring away from one another, into space.

Eris stood there a moment, admiring him. He was so insanely gorgeous. Not in the smoothly perfect way that Avery was, but in a swarthy, rugged sort of way; his features a perfect mix of his mom's Brazilian sensuality and the classic Anderton jaw and nose. Eris took a step forward, and Cord glanced up. She was gratified by the flash of appreciation in his ice-blue eyes.

"Hey there," he said as she pulled up an empty chair. She leaned on her elbows so that the neckline of her top skimmed lower over her breasts, and studied him across the table. There was something shockingly intimate in his gaze. It felt like he could reach over and touch her with nothing but his eyes.

"Want to play?" Cord swept a pile of cards toward her.

"I don't know. I might go dance." It was so quiet in here. She wanted to go back to the loud chaos of the party.

"Come on, one hand. Right now it's just me against these two. And it hasn't been that fun, playing with myself," Cord quipped.

"Fine. But I'm with Joaquin," Eris said, for no real reason except that she wanted to push him a little. "And you know I always win."

"Maybe not this time." Cord laughed.

Sure enough, fifteen minutes later, the pile of chips in front of her and Joaquin had tripled in size. Eris stretched her arms overhead and pushed her chair back from the table. "I'm getting a drink," she said meaningfully. "Anyone want one?"

"Why not?" Cord met her eyes. "I'll come with you."

They stumbled into the coatroom, their bodies pressed close together. "You look fantastic tonight," Cord whispered.

"No more talking." Eris yanked his head down and kissed him, hard.

Cord leaned forward in response, his mouth hot on hers. He snaked his hand around her waist, playing with the hem of her shirt. Eris could feel his pulse quickening where his wrist touched her bare skin. The kiss deepened, became more insistent.

She pulled away and stepped back, leaving Cord to stumble forward. "What?" he gasped.

"I'm going to dance," she said simply, reaching up to straighten her bra and smooth her hair; her motions brisk, neat, practiced. This was her favorite part, reminding Cord that he wanted her. Making him just a little bit desperate. "See you later."

As she started down the hallway, Eris could feel the weight of Cord's gaze tracing the long lines of her body. She didn't let herself look back. But the corner of her mouth, her red paintstick just a little bit smudged, turned up in a triumphant smirk.