

Being Nikki



I'M COLD.

I'm freezing, actually.

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

And since I'm wearing nothing but an extremely small white bikini and a thigh holder for the dagger I've got clenched between my teeth, I haven't got anything to protect me from their razor-sharp teeth. I just have to hang on, or else face possible limb

amputation or, at the very least, excruciating pain — worse than the pain I’m already experiencing, even. I’ve got to complete my mission, deliver the package to the mansion perched on the cliff above me. . . .

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

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

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

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

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

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

But it wasn’t as if he was here for any reason other than that he wanted to snag a ride on the corporate jet so he could spend

the day cruising around the island of St. John on a Jet Ski. He was solicitous now entirely because it was expected of him.

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

Lately, anyway.

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

"We just need a few more shots, Nikki," André called. "You're doing great." Someone said something, and he added, "Can you try to stop trembling?"

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

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

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

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

Why was I doing this again? Was it for a Stark brand perfume? Or a cell phone? I couldn't even remember anymore.

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

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

“I don’t know what she said,” I heard Brandon telling André.

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

I couldn’t tell what was happening, because the boat was behind me. But flashes started going off. I strained my neck, looking up the side of the cliff, trying to stay in my part. I tried not to think about the fact that I was in a way too skimpy white bikini. Instead, I pictured myself in body armor. I wasn’t me, Em Watts, at all. I was Lenneth Valkyrie, recruiting souls of fallen warriors and leading them to Valhalla. I could do it. I could do *anything*.

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

And I had no body armor. It made no sense, really, that a trained assassin — which is what I was apparently supposed to be — would climb a cliff barefoot in a bikini, without even a pocket where she’d be able to keep a cell phone. Except

possibly in her knife holder. Maybe that's why I was holding the knife in my mouth instead of where it would make sense, *in the holder?*

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

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

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

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

"You're doing great, Nikki," Francesco called, clicking away. "I can really see the grim determination on your face —"

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

Except that the knife blade was made of plastic.

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

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

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

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

Oh. So this was a deodorant ad.

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

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

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

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

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

But if I spent every spare minute of my time studying, I could maybe pass the eleventh grade. Not too shabby for a girl who had spent a month of this past semester in a coma.

So why was I so freaking depressed?

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

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

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

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

Because I’d heard a lot of similar stories over the past month — not just from Brandon, but from guys all over Manhattan — and I had a pretty good idea how it was going to

turn out. For a seventeen-year-old — and one who was allegedly going out with her employer's only son — Nikki Howard had certainly had a lot of male companions.

I heard screams from the boat. But a part of me didn't care.

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

Bone-chilling cold wasn't the only thing I experienced as I hit the water, though. I was also plunged into darkness. At least at first. Until my vision adjusted to the murky water, and I saw that the lights from the boat had lit up the ocean around me. That was when I knew I hadn't been bitten in half. There weren't any swirling clouds of blood around me. Just dark blobs I realized were nurse sharks, swimming frantically to get away from me. I guess Dom had been right — they *were* more scared of us than we were of them. I could also see my own hair, swaying like golden seaweed around me. They'd rowed me over to the cliff so carefully in a rubber dinghy just forty-five minutes earlier so as to keep my hair — and the swimsuit — from getting wet.

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

If I resurfaced.

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

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

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

But I'd never actually cared about lip gloss.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I was a little angry. And also shivering uncontrollably.

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

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

I don't think.

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

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

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

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

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

Great. Not: *Nikki, thank God, you're all right.* But: *Nikki, thank God, it's all right; I got the shot.*

God forbid he might not have.

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

Not until we'd got the shot.