Nicole ’Dell
SWEPT AWAY
Interactive Fiction for Girls
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*Dare to Be Different*
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Nicole ’Dell

SWEPT AWAY

Interactive Fiction for Girls
HIGH STAKES
DEDICATION

Logan, Megan, and Ryleigh, at not even two years old, the three of you have so much life ahead. Your eager young minds and sweet spirits bring joy to me every moment of every day. I pray you stay little as long as possible and grow up slowly in the loving embrace of your Savior, Jesus. Someday, when you’re ready, you can read these books your ol’ mom wrote and know that all I want is for you to make wise choices. With God’s help, your dad and I will uphold you through all that life throws your way. I love you with all my heart.

—Mom
Chapter 1

OUT WITH THE OLD

“You might have to get out and push.”

Amber groaned and rolled her eyes. “Very funny, Dad. The scary thing is, one of these days, it’s going to be true.”

Dad chuckled. “Ah, she hasn’t failed us yet.” He rubbed the faded steering wheel.

“Well, there’s a first time for everything.” Amber sulked down in the cracked vinyl seat and covered her eyes with her forearm. Her friends all had fancy new SUVs or expensive sedans. But no, her parents never wanted a car payment or—gasp!—a lease payment. Nothing but a complete waste of money when they already had a perfectly reliable vehicle—or so they said. If she had a dollar for every time they’d explained the horrors of a lease agreement...
The brakes squealed as Dad pulled the twelve-year-old Toyota into the garage. He smiled and patted the dashboard. “You did it, girl.” He’d somehow ignored the *putt* . . . *sputter* . . . *putt* sounds the car had made all the way up the driveway.

“Yeah, Dad. We made it home. But what about tomorrow? What about the next day? When will we ever be able to get a new car now that you lost your job?” Amber squeezed her eyes shut, holding back the tears that threatened to spill.

“Now, Amber.”

Amber steeled herself against the coming speech that she knew by heart and caught the sigh before it escaped her mouth.

Dad’s lips moved in what looked like prayer for a few moments. He took a deep breath and turned her chin with his hand until she lifted her watery eyes to meet his. “God has always provided everything we’ve ever needed and much, much more. I have no reason to think He’s going to stop now.” He let go of her face and rubbed her arm. “Sweetie, give Him a chance.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” Amber rolled her eyes and fought the urge to point out that God had provided that stuff—which wasn’t excessive, by any means—before He *unprovided* Dad’s
job. She climbed out of the car and paused a moment to give the rusted hood a few little pats—like paying respects at a funeral. Sigh.

Amber had one foot in the door when she heard three light honks. Brittany! She let her book bag slide off her shoulder. It landed on the garage floor with a thud. She jogged out to the driveway to greet her best friend.

The window on the driver’s side of the brand-new, silver Lexus SUV slid down and Mrs. Kim leaned her head out. “You girls be good and have fun. I will come to get you tomorrow afternoon.” She spoke in halting but precise English.

“Okay, Mom. Thanks.” Brittany waved her tiny hand as she came around from the other side and joined Amber on the driveway.

As the girls walked toward the house, Amber rested her forearm on Brittany’s shoulder.

Brittany shook her head and laughed. “You know, one of these days that’s going to get old.”

“Nah. You love it and you know it.” They walked through the garage toward the house, and Amber bent to pick up her schoolbag then opened the door to the dated kitchen. “Don’t mind the cracked tile and stained countertops. I promise they’re clean.” Amber flicked away a crumb.
Brittany laughed. “You give me the same little speech every time I come here. You’d think after ten years, you’d know I don’t care about tile and countertops.”

“Easy for you to say. Your dad got promoted to Chief Something-or-Other the same week my dad got laid off from teaching. Your house is perfect. Mine…” Amber waved her arm. “Well, not so much.” She slumped as she pulled open the refrigerator door to see what they could snack on. *Ooh! Leftover frozen pizza.*

“Yeah, I’m really sorry about your dad’s job.” Brittany picked a few pieces of nonexistent lint from her sleeve.

“It’s pretty bad timing with college next year and all.” Tears burned at her eyelids again. Amber blinked them away before Brittany could notice.

“But your grades are perfect. You’ll probably get a scholarship. I thought that was the plan anyway.” Brittany threw her hands up. “We’ve talked about getting scholarships and going to college together since we were little—we’ve got to get out of small-town Gwinett.”

“Yeah, I know. But if I don’t get one, I probably won’t be going away to school. I’ll have to get a job and go to the community college part time.” Amber shrugged. “It’ll be fine.
“Right?” She finally turned around to look at Brittany.

“Fine? That would not be fine. Not at all. You can’t stay trapped in this valley dungeon forever, surrounded by nothing but mountains. And you will get a scholarship. You’ll see.”

“Thanks. I do love the mountains, though.” Amber couldn’t risk getting her hopes up.

“Well, everyone loves the mountains. But there’s so much world out there.” Brittany pointed out the window.

“Yeah, well... anyway... enough of that.” Amber held up the pizza. “Cold or heated?”

“Definitely cold.” Brittany grabbed a piece as big as her face.

How did Brittany pack away so much food? She could eat twice as much as Amber. Where did she put it all? “Sounds good to me. Grab some more if you want. Let’s go downstairs.” Amber inspected an ivory porcelain plate for chips or cracks before she handed it to Brittany. She reached in the refrigerator to grab two cans of Coke. *Nope.* In its usual spot, she found an imposter, the store brand. She grimaced and held it up for Brittany to read the logo. “Hope cola’s okay.”

Brittany smiled and reached for the can.
“Hey, works for me.”

“This cutting corners stuff is starting to get on my nerves.” Amber shook her head, took her plate, and hurried from the kitchen.

The girls went down to the basement, which Amber’s parents had let them turn into a hangout a few months back. They’d put a big rug down on the cold cement floor and brought Brittany’s plush, gray sofa over when her parents bought a new leather set. Amber reached for the television remote but put it right back down, opting for music instead. She flipped on the stereo and turned up the volume.

“So, what do you want to do tonight?” Brittany plopped down on the couch and took a bite of her cold pizza.

“I’m open to whatever.” Amber pushed a stray crumb back into her mouth. “Make some suggestions.”

“Well, we could shop, go see a movie, check out Kyle’s birthday party...” Brittany counted each idea on a finger.

Amber sighed. “All I hear is money, money, money.”

Brittany shifted her legs as her eyes glazed over in apparent irritation.

_Oops. I’m being a drag._ “But I wouldn’t mind

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helping you shop. And Kyle’s party—well, we’d have to think of an inexpensive present. He is my cousin, but it’s not like we buy gifts for each other every year.” Amber stood up and started for the stairs. “Let’s go get ready.”

“Great.” Brittany jumped off the couch and brushed the crumbs off her pants before following. “We can find a gag gift for Kyle—something creative and funny that won’t cost much.”

Amber stopped abruptly and whirled around to face her friend, almost knocking her over. “Wait a sec. How’re we going to get around? You don’t have a car with you, and neither of us wants to be caught dead in my dad’s car.”

“Oh, come on, your car would be fine. But let me call my dad and see if there’s another possibility—he should be home from work by now. Hang on.” Brittany pulled out her sleek new smartphone and touched the screen in a few places. One more light tap and the speakerphone turned on.

Amber could hear it ringing.

Click. “Hello?”

“Hey Dad, it’s me.”

“What do you need, Brittany?”

Amber giggled at his halting speech. Like
Brittany’s mom, Mr. Kim spoke nearly perfect English even though he’d been raised in Korea. Amber thought his accent sounded cute.

Brittany glared and put her finger to her lips. “Dad, I was wondering if you and Mom have plans tonight?”

“We are going out to a restaurant in one hour. Your mother is getting ready now.”

“Since you’re home now and Mom’s done shopping, would you mind if Brittany and I came by to get a car? We want to go to the mall and to a birthday party.”

“That is okay. But I can drop off car to you. It would be a long walk.”

Brittany winked at Amber. “That would be so great, Dad. Thanks!”

“Welcome, Brittany. See you in one hour.”

Brittany slid her phone closed and gave Amber a triumphant look. “There. We’ve got good wheels and good plans. Now we need...”

“Good outfits! Now that I can help with. Let’s go.” They scrambled up the stairs to Amber’s room and hurried to her closet.

“It’s a good thing you have on great jeans, Britt. Mine would be huge on you.”

“Yeah, these are my favorite ones anyway—they’re new.” She twirled to look at her body in
the mirrored closet door.

After about fifteen minutes of sorting through tops, they settled on a couple of long-sleeved, burn-out tees over lace-trimmed camis. “I’d like to wear the amethyst one, it goes with my green eyes.” Amber held the purple shirt up to her chin and batted her long eyelashes.

“Good. I wanted to wear the red one anyway.” Brittany grabbed the hanger out of Amber’s hand.

Satisfied with their choices, they dressed quickly and turned back to the mirror. Brittany hardly ever wore makeup, so it surprised Amber when Britt started rifling through the makeup drawer. She applied some pink blush to her cheeks and some mascara to her dark eyelashes, which helped open her eyes a bit. After a swipe of lip gloss, she ran a brush through her silky hair and then plopped on the bed to wait for Amber.

They heard a soft knock at the door. “Come in.” Amber turned to look. “Hey, Mom. What’s up?”

Her mom stood in the doorway wearing her typical tracksuit and wiping the sweat from her forehead.

“You just get back from a run?”
“Yeah, I did four miles—on the treadmill, though. I didn’t go out.” She paused to catch her breath. “But I wanted you to know you left all of your dirty dishes down in the basement.”

“Oh, I didn’t know!”

Mom swiped at the sweat dripping down her red face with the towel hanging around her neck. “You promised, when your dad and I let you convert that space into a hangout, that you’d keep it picked up. If you can’t, you won’t be able to take food down there. We don’t want to wind up with an ant problem—or worse.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Mom. We got excited about our plans. I’ll take care of it before we leave.”

Brittany winced and offered a hesitant smile. “Yeah, I’m really sorry, Mrs. Stevens.”

“It’s okay. I already cleaned it up this time. Just make sure you pay more attention next time.” Mom turned to leave the room. “Oh, one other thing I almost forgot. You left the kitchen light on, as well as the light on the basement stairs and the two lights in the basement. That’s a lot of wasted electricity. That costs money.”

“Sorry,” Amber mumbled. Couldn’t she just let it go? As her mom left the room, Amber glanced at Brittany, hoping she hadn’t paid too much attention to the lecture. Amber silently
buckled her belt and pulled on a pair of brown knee-high boots, then smoothed the leg of her jeans around her ankles.

Approaching the mirror, she cheered up when she saw the new hairdo she’d paid for with her birthday money last week. It still shocked her when she caught a view of herself. Going from a cute shoulder-length bob to a shorter choppy layered cut with big chunky highlights made her feel more spirited, fun—edgy. Amber rubbed her fingers in a tub of pomade and then used them to piece her style into more spiky chunks. One last ruffle achieved the desired messy look. Satisfied with the results, she sprayed a light aerosol mist of hairspray and then shook her head to make sure her hair still bounced—just like the hairdresser had taught her. Perfect.

Now for makeup. She stared at the mirror for a second.

Brittany snored loudly from the bed.

“Very funny!” Amber grabbed a pillow from the floor and threw it at her. “Hey, perfection takes time.”


Amber turned back to the mirror. Now,
what had that makeup lady said about plum eye shadow? Wasn’t it plum that contrasted and highlighted green eyes the best? Okay, here goes. Amber swiped some along the lower part of her upper lid and out from the corner. Then she added some dark eyeliner and lots of mascara to her long lashes.

“Ugh. I’m so jealous. Your eyes look beautiful.” Brittany moved back to the mirror. “If I put that much makeup on, I’d look like a clown or a little girl playing dress up.”

Amber laughed. “I’m sorry. But I can’t disagree. Your sweet little face would look silly with all of this on it. Be glad you’re so gorgeous you don’t even need it.” She added some blush and some rose-tinted lip gloss. She snapped the cap back on the tube and slipped it into her pocket for touchups. “I’m ready. You all set?”

“Yes. As soon as my dad gets here with the car, we can leave.” At that moment, the doorbell rang and the girls packed up their things and scurried down the stairs.

Amber beat Mom to the front door and pulled it open. “Hi, Mr. Kim.” She tried to sidle around her mom to get out of the house in a hurry. Mrs. Kim was moving from the driver’s seat of the Volvo to the passenger seat of the
SUV. Couldn’t let Mom figure out that Mr. and Mrs. Kim brought them the extra vehicle because Amber didn’t want to be seen in their own car. “Gotta go, Mom.” Amber kissed her on the cheek and stepped onto the porch. “We’ll be back by eleven.”

“Where are you g–?” The front door clicked shut on Mom’s question.

_Oops._ Amber froze on the porch step. Would her mom open the door to finish her inquiry? After a few seconds, Amber figured Mom had let it go. _Phew._ She waved at Mr. and Mrs. Kim as they drove off in the Lexus and climbed into the black Volvo where Brittany already waited in the driver’s seat. Rubbing the tan leather upholstery, Amber leaned her head back on the luxury headrest. She reached up and pushed the button to slide open the moon roof and flipped on the satellite radio. “Now, this is the life.”

“Are you mad we left early?” Brittany gripped the steering wheel.

“Not really. I just don’t understand the problem.”

“I didn’t feel comfortable.” Brittany glanced at Amber and then to the road. “People kept going in and out of that one bathroom and
locking the door.”

Amber laughed. “Don’t people usually lock the door when they go into the bathroom?”

“Two or three people at the same time?” Brittany shook her head. “No. There was something going on in there. Besides, Paula Markham told me that some people were doing drugs.”

“Hah. Paula is the biggest gossip in school. I don’t believe a word she says.” Amber rolled her eyes. “And Kyle does not do drugs. He’s too smart for that.” Who did Britt think she was, accusing her cousin like that?

Brittany sighed. “I didn’t say for sure that Kyle was doing drugs or that he even knew about it. But something didn’t feel right.”

“All right. Let’s drop it.” Amber rested her forehead on the cold window and watched the darkness fly by. “I was ready to leave anyway.” Would she have stayed longer if she’d gone alone?