



“EMERSON WATTS,” CALLED MY FIRST-period Public Speaking teacher, Mr. Greer, startling me from the light doze into which I’d drifted.

Well, whatever. Do they really expect us to be alert at eight-fifteen in the morning? Come on.

“Here,” I called, jerking my head from the top of my desk and surreptitiously feeling the side of my mouth, just in case I’d been drooling.

But I guess I didn’t do it surreptitiously enough, since Whitney Robertson, seated with her long, tanned legs crossed beneath a desk a few feet away from mine, snickered and hissed, “Loser.”

I threw her a dirty look and mouthed, *Bite me.*

To which she responded by narrowing her heavily made-up baby blue eyes at me and mouthing back smugly, *You wish*.

“Em,” Mr. Greer said, with a yawn. I guess he’d been up pretty late last night, too. Only I’m guessing it wasn’t because he’d been frantically finishing his homework for this class, like I had. “I wasn’t calling roll. It’s time for you to give the class your two-minute persuasive oral piece. We’re going in reverse alphabetical order, remember?”

Great. Just great.

Chagrined, I slid out from behind my desk and made my way to the front of the room, while the rest of the class tittered. All except Whitney, I saw. That’s because she had dug her compact mirror out of her bag and was gazing at her own reflection. Lindsey Jacobs, seated in the row beside hers, stared at Whitney admiringly and whispered, “That shade of gloss is so you.”

“I know,” Whitney murmured to her reflection.

I fought off a reflexive urge to gag — because I was about to speak in public, not because of their exchange . . . although I guess that could have had something to do with it — and turned around to face the room. Twenty-four sleepy faces blinked back at me.

And I realized I had completely forgotten the speech I’d been up half the night writing.

“All right, Emerson,” Mr. Greer said. “You’ve got two minutes.” He looked down at his watch. “And . . .”

Amazing. The second he said that, my mind went even *more* blank. All I could think was . . . how did she know? Lindsey, I mean. That that shade of lip gloss was so right on Whitney? I have been alive nearly seventeen years, and I still have no idea what shade of lip gloss looks good on me . . . or anybody else, for that matter.

I blame my dad. He's the one who gave me a boy's name to begin with, since he'd been so sure I was going to be one — despite what the ultrasound had shown — because I kicked my mom so much while I was in the womb. Dad insisted on naming me after his favorite poet, which is what you get when your father teaches university-level English literature. I guess my mom was still high off her epidural or something, because she totally let him, even after the ultrasound turned out to be right. So *Emerson Watts* is what it says on my birth certificate.

I know. I was a victim of sexual stereotyping in utero. How many girls can claim *that*?

“. . . go,” Mr. Greer said, turning on his oven timer.

And just like that, all the research I'd done on my assigned topic the night before came flooding back.

Phew.

“Females,” I began, “make up thirty-nine percent of people who play interactive computer games, and yet only a small fraction of the games created by the estimated thirty-five-billion-

dollar worldwide gaming industry is geared toward female players.”

I paused . . . but it didn't matter.

I guess I couldn't really blame them. It *was* so early in the morning, after all.

Even Christopher, who lives in my building and is supposedly my best friend, wasn't paying attention. He was in his normal seat in the back row, and he was upright.

But his eyes were closed.

“A study,” I went on, “by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA showed that the percentage of computer degrees granted to women has now dropped to an all-time low of less than thirty percent. Computer science is the only field in which women's participation is actually *decreasing* over time. . . .”

Oh, God. No one in first-period Public Speaking was awake now but me. Even Mr. Greer's eyes had drifted shut.

Terrific. Way to be part of the problem, Mr. Greer, and not the solution.

“Many researchers believe this is due to our educational system failing to engage girls in the sciences — particularly computer science — during the middle school years,” I battled on, staring directly at Mr. Greer. Not that he noticed. He was now gently snoring.

Great. Just great. I mean, I'd been slightly psyched when I'd gotten my topic, because the truth is, I *like* computer games. Well, one computer game, anyway.

"So what can be done to keep girls interested in gaming," I went on, desperately, "which studies show increases problem-solving and strategic abilities, and also helps develop social interaction skills and cooperative play?"

There was no point, I realized. Really.

"Well," I said. "I could strip off my clothes and reveal to you that under my jeans and sweatshirt I'm actually wearing a tank top and short-shorts, much like Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* . . . only mine are flame-retardant and covered in glow-in-the-dark dinosaur stickers."

No one stirred. Not even Christopher, who actually has a thing for Lara Croft.

"I know what you're thinking," I went on. "Glow-in-the-dark dinosaur stickers are so last year. But I think they add a certain *je ne sais quoi* to the whole ensemble. It's true, short-shorts are uncomfortable under jeans and hard to get off in the ladies' room, but they make the twin thigh-holsters in which I hold my high-caliber pistols so easy to get to. . . ."

The oven timer dinged.

"Thank you, Em," Mr. Greer said, yawning. "That was very persuasive."