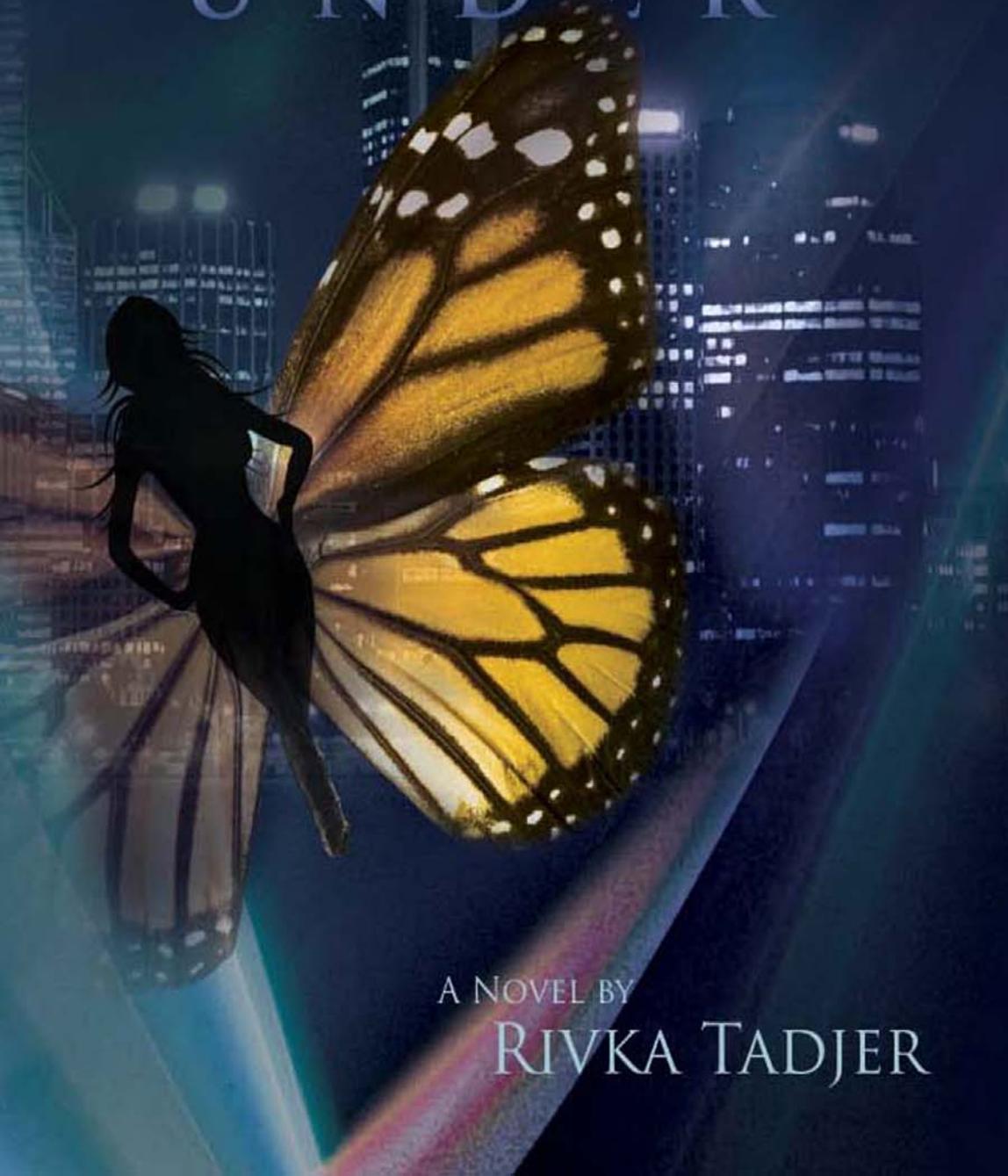


"...smart, hip, and all too human..."

TWO WEEKS UNDER



A NOVEL BY
RIVKA TADJER

TWO WEEKS UNDER

Rivka Tadjer



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For Tillie, With Love

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NEW YORK, PRESENT DAY

Pam Connor is dying to lose some weight. Standing in front of her full length mirror, she can see her charcoal grey suit jacket pulling across her chest, her upper back bulging out from the bra strap. Ten pounds isn't enough. She needs to shed 20 at least. Not eating for two solid weeks is the only way. They say it's as easy as falling asleep.

It can't be soon enough. In profile, her arms look sausage in the tight sleeves. She searches the closet, her head pounding, but there's nothing else. This is her biggest suit, and there's no getting away with casual today. She's finally being allowed to present her product proposal at the executive meeting. She hates presenting on even her best day, but this proposal is a winner, and for once she's going to get credit. And then, once she's thin, she'll get a promotion to go with that credit.

Pam leaves her brownstone apartment, head down, pace fast, so even the corner deli guy won't smile at her. She just can't cope with niceties this morning, still mortified from being stood up last night, for what would have been her first date since her fiancé Phil disappeared a year ago. Why she ever risked a humiliating event the night before the most important meeting of her career is beyond her.

Pam lifts her head only when she reaches the Millennial Springs office building, home of premier bottled water and "Your Lifestyle Company for the Next 1,000 Years". It's nestled in the heart of ADD Central, otherwise known as Times Square. She takes a deep breath

and tries to don the smile of a rising-star marketer.

When the elevator opens on her floor, Pam stops short. So preoccupied, she's forgotten about the dreaded new clear-walled cube awaiting her. The place smells like Scotchguard, and the newly installed technological marvel is a true cube, including a ceiling and a floor, made of soundproofed, highly durable plastic.

Once she steps inside, Pam's first goal is to see if she can move at all, or if she's just dead weight now. How is it possible? This thing is actually smaller than her old, low-rent cube. It's more like a tollbooth. To leave the cube, she has to swivel away from the desk, face the door, hit the door-open button, and kind of hop out. It should be noted this is not a task for heels.

Pam sprays perfume, hoping for some double action that might also dissipate the sense of claustrophobia. Karen, the one person at work she used to chat with over the old cube dividers, waves from her own hermetically sealed desk, and holds her nose in solidarity. They share a smile, but that's it. Now Pam is all alone.

The mission of the new cubes is to offer sound privacy to sales people who are constantly on the phone, and quiet for their neighbors. They couldn't make them with solid walls, or it would feel like you're sitting in an outhouse – so the logic goes.

Pam looks up to see Karen singing in her cube, tapping away at her keyboard. Guilted by her instant acclimation, Pam swivels to assume the position of a safe and productive employee, hands poised, eyes locked and loaded on the computer.

A deaf person once told her that his other senses were heightened by his lack of hearing. A quick calculation tells Pam that means everyone really *is* watching now. One of Pam's many shrinks – number four, or maybe it was number five – explained to Pam that constantly feeling watched is a sign of depression. She asked the good doctor what it meant if you're feeling watched because you *are* being watched, but she did not receive an answer.

"Don't go there," she mutters, opening the file to her new product proposal: Sulfur Shower and Bath, A Hot Springs in Your Own Home. "This is rock solid." A special faucet, home delivery of a sulfur water tank, maintenance included. It's going to make Millennian a ton of money, give it credibility as a health-industry company, not just a

water seller, and they'll finally have to promote her to vice president.

I will not let today go downhill. All is good.

She must have pushed her luck with that last thought, because here comes Deja Gerber, the bane of her existence, the weasel of business development. In the perfect position to steal her work, and seemingly bereft of all human conscience, Deja has spent the last two years plucking everything Pam does for her own. The executives love her. She presents at every meeting. If Deja gets promoted again before Pam gets their attention, Pam will report directly to her, forever cemented as Deja's lackey.

Deja. She's not even close to being French. The woman has been one big affectation since the day she was born.

Pam wishes she didn't notice how tall, slim, and undeniably smart Deja looks in her charcoal black suit. Their outfits are extremely similar, essentially cookie cutter suits from two different designers. But Deja doesn't just look better. She's in a different league.

She's a bad omen, Pam just knows it. There's no reason for her to be down here this morning. Deja is snooping because of Pam's direct memo to the boss last Friday, asking to present her own proposal. She has been out for blood ever since.

Pam's heart pangs with doom when the cube doorbell chimes. A goddamned doorbell for a space the size of a U-Haul wardrobe box. Only Deja would actually ring it.

"Pammie! Your big day!" The gallon of perfume she's wearing stinks up Pam's cube. She never stops smiling. "Aren't these fabulously private? I hate listening to other people on the phone."

Deja, of course, has a real office.

"I don't mean to clip your wings here," Deja shrugs, "but what are you going to do about the rotten egg smell of sulfur?"

"It isn't a problem." Pam leans back on her chair.

"Really? It's not in the proposal. You know, I was working on this idea a while back – my old proposal is upstairs somewhere — and my project fizzled because of the smell."

Liar! Pam concentrates on keeping her expression perfectly still. "It's going to be a big surprise! Thanks for coming by," she says, swiveling back to her screen. What she hates most about Deja is how fat she makes her feel. This company is all about a fresh-faced athletic

image, and just looking at Deja makes Pam feel huge. The executives have turned a blind eye to Deja stealing her work because of her weight, she just knows it.

As if she can read Pam's mind, Deja stands tall, turning slightly, hands on her waist, her jacket pushed open. It's a good move. Deja reveals a flat stomach, a slim figure down to her pointy boots. She's even thin in pleated pants. It's a classic Millennial executive look. Pam looks at Deja, whose eyes say: You have your trump card, I have mine.

Pam's private cell phone starts ringing. At least Deja can't tell it's a private call, because Pam's personal cell is the exact same model as her work phone. Paranoia has its benefits.

Politely, Deja slinks away.

"Hello, Pam. It's Edgar, from Monarch spa."

Dr. Voss' familiar voice is so deep and calming, it washes over Pam like a soothing silk sheet. She still can't get over the fact that the handsome and completely single neurologist makes his own patient phone calls.

"I've got your blood work results," Dr. Voss says.

"Great..." Her cheeks go hot. There's no doubt in her mind that these new clear walls have ears. "Can I call you *right* back? Less than five minutes?"

"Of course. I'll be here."

She clicks her phone shut, trips out of her cube, and pauses in front of Karen's cube until the door slides open. Up close, Pam can see Karen's screen is open to LLBean.com.

"Can you believe this thing has a door? I feel like a toy in a plastic box," Karen says.

"Have you tried screaming yet?" Pam smiles.

"I'm afraid I'll look like a mute horror movie doll."

Pam laughs. "Seed of Chucky. I'm surprised they don't bind us to our desks with those twisty wires." She pauses. "Listen, Karen, I'll be back in five minutes. I just have to run downstairs and pick up the new AmericaToday market research report, in case anyone wants to know."

Karen mumbles uh-huh, her gaze drawn back to the computer. "I'm reduced to looking for jeans online. Did you know that LL Bean makes the only jeans in America that allow for my butt? Even Donna Karan sold me out. But look at them. Too matronly to spend a dime

on.” She clicks off the site. “Forget it. I’m not buying new jeans until I can face them in a store. What did you say?”

“I’ll be back in five minutes. I’m sure you look great in any jeans. Don’t worry so much.”

“Like a great-looking pumpkin stuffed in sausage wrapping!” Karen calls after her.

Shaking her head, Pam scurries away, envying Karen’s sense of humor, mortified that someone might have heard that last quip and attributed it to her.

“Sorry about that,” Pam says when Dr. Voss answers and she’s safely outside the building.

“No need to apologize. I understand the need for discretion at work.”

“I’m impressed you’re still there. I don’t think I’ve ever gotten a doctor on the phone twice in a row.”

Nice laugh he has, and he’s free with it. “That doesn’t say much for my ilk. So, congratulations. Your blood work shows a clean bill of health. You’re all clear to proceed with our two-week Metamorphosis coma diet. Your body will respond beautifully to the sleep induction drug.”

Now that it’s real, Pam can’t find words.

“Would you like me to go over the details, or do you want more time to think?” Dr. Voss asks. “I’ll answer the phone, even on an entirely different day.”

“No, no, tell me,” Pam says, turning her back to the smiling Fedex guy heading inside her building. “I’m ready to do this.” She walks down the street a bit, to stand in front of someone else’s building.

“The base price for the home coma is \$5,000 per week, which is really quite a bargain. It would cost five times that much in the hospital. The truth is most of our clients prefer the privacy of their own home.” He waits a second, making sure she’s really ready to listen. “Of course that doesn’t include a spa and gym membership, but I’ll get you a discount, even if you don’t do the coma.”

“Oh, I’m doing it.”

“I think you’ll be very pleased. Once you’re under, I make a daily house call, plus twenty-four-seven video monitoring from the Control Room here at Monarch. There are physician techs in the Control

Room around the clock, too, so it's not just left to technology. They page me instantly, day or night, if anything at all changes. And if for any reason I'm not available immediately, there are other Caretakers on call, always. Our CEO will make a house call himself if he's needed."

Pam's wheels are spinning. Her 5-foot-5 body weighs 148, as of this morning. The brochure claims you lose 5 to 10 pounds of fat each week of the coma and, depending on the extent of your body fat, an extra 5 to 100 pounds post-coma when your stomach shrinks permanently. So, optimistically, 15 pounds out of the gate, and let's say another 10 after. She wouldn't dare dream that it could be more. She'll be 125 by the next promotion time. Perfect.

"The home coma is completely safe. We've never had a single problem. It's truly revolutionary." He pauses. "Sorry, I sound like a true believer."

Pam smiles. He really is endearing. During her physical, when she became squeamish about having blood drawn, she remembers him putting his warm hand on her shoulder. The comfort was instant.

She clears her throat. "Please, be a believer, it helps. Like when you told me you did the coma. How can I say no if I get a bona fide neurologist making house calls to me once a day?"

"I'm glad you think I'm a plus."

"I'm ready." Pam twirls a blue stone on a ring she wears, the one nervous twitch she has that's not fattening. Her excitement is growing with every second of Edgar's devotion. "Set me up."

A smile lingers after she hangs up. After the Metamorphosis, she'll buy a membership to the exclusive Monarch spa and gym. It has, among other things, two bars, a market-cafe, and frequent parties. It's a social club as much as a state-of-the-art gym, and she'll meet a decent caliber of people, not like that no-show asshole from last night. And with her promotion, she'll buy a whole new wardrobe -- in a size 6, at most.

Now she's dying to get on with that meeting. Once her "Sulfur Springs" proposal is approved, she'll cash in a few weeks of her untouched sick leave. Her workaholicism, for once, will really pay off. When she returns, they'll promote her for fear of losing her.

She catches a glimpse of her reflection in the tinted glass wall of her office building. *Ugh*. Of course Millennium is nice and secure

in ignoring their plump foot soldier Pam Connor. She just saw a spot on CNN about today's workplace, in every major industry, being infiltrated by unspoken appearance policies: Food, fashion, healthcare, sports, diet, media, entertainment – where's she going to go, looking like she does now?

Pam has worked at Millennial since college and has never seen an overweight person promoted, male or female. And there's no way to hide the 25 pounds or so she's put on in the last couple of years. Their weightism is too subtle to argue with, naturally. They're not stupid enough to get sued. Look at pixie stick Deja. The woman doesn't have an idea in her head and she'll probably be president some day.

Pam realizes she's staring at her reflection in the building wall and quickly walks inside. When she's 125 pounds, either they can reward her or she'll write her ticket elsewhere, and she'll be damned sure to take the same attitude with men.

With some pep in her step, Pam heads back up to the office, more than ready for that meeting, pushing down her tiny voice of conscience. *A medically induced vanity coma? Yes, dammit. There's no other way, and I know I'll feel great.* She can't handle answering to Deja, or suffering the insipid men she now attracts. Edgar is so decent, and he Metamorphosized. That's all the sign she needs.



When Pam returns to the office, Karen waves her over. She looks around and then whispers: "Deja's been in your cube. She claimed she left her purse in there."

Frantically, Pam goes to her computer, straight to the sulfur-bath proposal folder, where the secret of the egg-smell concealer is. *Shit!* She didn't lock the file. She was so obsessed with talking to Dr. Voss she forgot.

She can hear herself breathing too hard, so she unlocks the drawer where she keeps her beloved Normal pills. With her hand still in the drawer, she splits the little blue pill in half. Once anxiety sets in these days, only Normal will help. But she's disciplined about it. Only half a pill, since she's at work.

Quite uninvited, ex-fiancé Phil's voice rings in her head: "You take things too seriously, and it makes you screw up." She wants to pick

up her stapler and wing it across the room. Her computer sings that she has in-house email: The meeting will start 15 minutes late. Pam, who doesn't believe in coincidences, takes the other half of the Normal pill.

As she enters the conference room half an hour later, Deja is already at the podium, flanked by two senior executives. It's packed, standing room only. She starts to head for the podium, still determined to make her presentation, but the executive vice president hushes the crowd.

"Let's all congratulate Deja Gerber. She figured out how to remove the egg smell and taste from sulfuric water, globally renowned for its amazing therapeutic properties!"

The crowd cheers. Pam's world starts to swirl out of focus.

"We were out of luck until I found the smell and taste concealer. Give us a year and we'll have sulfur baths installed all over the country!"

Pam leans against a wall, glowering at Deja, who must feel her gaze but won't look at her. The executive vice president is now passing out little sample cups of the water, bragging about how cost effective and simple the elusive concealer solution is. Pam has never seen someone with such nerve. Deja swiped Pam's formula, and must have run straight down to the lab this morning, to have them mix up a gallon of the sulfur water. Why doesn't the executive vice president even question why Pam's not presenting the proposal, after all her memos?

Well, Pam's not going to just stand there and take it. She marches through the crowd, which now resembles a cocktail party, everyone oohing and ahing and chatting about the delicious water. She approaches the executive vice president. Deja's eyes are covertly on her, ears tuned in.

Pam clears her throat. "Don't you find it odd that the ingredients were in the lab? When I –"

"That's the best part!" The executive vice president is beaming. "I can't believe how resourceful Deja is." Then he leans in to stage-whisper. "And what a great team leader you have in her. Can you imagine how embarrassing it would have been if you had gone ahead and presented today without her discovery?" He pats her shoulder. "Stick close to Deja. Mentors who step in and save the day are hard to

find. You'll learn a lot."

Pam honestly thinks she might throw up, so she turns around, shrinks back into the crowd, and walks out of the room. As far as she's concerned, her sick leave just began.



At home, Pam changes into her big pair of jeans and her favorite red cashmere sweater, but it doesn't help. She can't remember the last time she was home at four in the afternoon. The sunlight pours in through the windows, making her feel overexposed and underemployed.

The Metamorphosis coma sleep pod has arrived, and once it's set up, it looms large in her living room. She pushes down on the squishy foam mattress, made of that NASA space age material, and then watches her hand imprint slowly spring back up into nothingness. There are buttons and lights everywhere on the pod, and the metal exerciser attachments stick out from the sides like spider legs.

Pacing, she assures herself that being sick is the perfect alibi; it will make the weight loss ring true. If they have any brains at all, they'll eventually figure out the proposal was her idea. If not, she'll march up to the executive suite and make her case when she's 125 pounds and supremely marketable. It will be the last time Deja has stolen from her.

That said, she wouldn't put it past Deja to tell everyone that she's not sick, but job hunting. Especially if she takes more than a week off without filing a doctor's diagnosis with Personnel. Technically, company policy is that sick leave days are only paid for if you have a doctor's note. They might not question her, since she has never taken a sick day, unless Deja opens her mouth. But once she does, they will for sure. Truth is, Pam wouldn't care about taking the days without pay, but she cannot afford to have them think she's disloyal.

She needs a doctor's note and a prescription for antibiotics, for a serious infection like pneumonia or bad Strep. That should be enough substantiation, and she knows just whom to ask.

Pam calls Greg Thomas, her closest friend, even though he is really more of a work contact than a friend. An editor at *America Today*, the nation's newspaper, Greg is in charge of the front-page stat box. Every day, he thinks up off-beat polls, conducts the surveys, and charts

the results. His way of crystallizing daily life is so popular there's now a version of the stat box running on a screen in Times Square.

She doesn't like to think about how much she likes Greg. He's secretive, intense, and so well-versed on so many subjects, Pam can't help but wonder if he's a CIA mole. Among his many talents, Greg can get an unethical doctor to write a prescription for pretty much anything.

"Hey, Pam! Okay, get this," Greg starts in, even before she says hello. "Tomorrow's box: Out of one million people polled, 43% say cherry is their favorite flavor; 28% say grape; and 29% say lemon/lime. They lumped lemon and lime together, one flavor. Isn't that disturbing? Even though I specifically asked: Rank in order of preference: Lemon, Cherry, Grape, Lime."

This is normally the highlight of her day, but right now she's not in the mood for his banter. "You only offered them four flavors? Control freak. Why no strawberry?"

"You're wounding me here. Strawberry is a sickly-sweet, malevolent flavor. A primary cause of the numbing of the American palette. There will be no strawberry in my stat box, not while I'm still standing." Short pause. "What's wrong?"

Pam loves Greg's perceptiveness. Phil used to complain that she never shared her feelings, that he was forced to read her mind. But asking someone to notice when you're miserable is like asking someone to throw a surprise party for you. "I'm burnt out, want to go on a hiking trip. Can you get me an alibi prescription for heavy-duty antibiotics?"

He asks why she doesn't just take a vacation instead of sick leave, as she knew he would, so she tells him the whole ugly story.

"Oh, man, she's such a witch. You should quit and come work here. I'm calling the doc right now."

While she waits for Greg to call back, she stares at photo of him at a work function. He's sinewy and pony-tailed, with smiling green eyes, wearing his standard camel blazer and jeans. Undeniably sexy, but he's known her for a year and nothing has ever happened. Maybe it's because he's 10 years older and feels weird about it. But she doubts it.

The best part of her job is to take Greg to dinner regularly. They talk shop mostly, and he's guarded about himself. But he's so sharp and funny, she loves to pretend the dinners have nothing to do with work.

Pam closes her eyes for a long second.

Greg can never find out about her going through the Metamorphosis. He'd be appalled, simply appalled. He's the one who told Pam about Monarch in the first place. At the Millennial Christmas party where they first met, he told her his stat for the next day's newspaper was about dieting habits before, during, and after the Christmas season. The popular Monarch was busiest before Christmas. He even pointed out people at the party whom he thought were Metamorphosis coma diet graduates. He said it with such disdain. No, he can't know. She would be heartbroken if he stopped accepting her invitations to dinner.

To distract herself, she turns on the TV. In breaking news, there's yet *another* female suicide in the city, a young rising-star Wall Street lawyer, a tragedy no one understands. The woman was 35. Her picture sits under the "Suicide in New York" logo that appeared a while ago, when 30-something women started killing themselves in Manhattan. Exhaustion Syndrome is what they're calling it, where you lose judgment after being a workaholic for too long. Pam doesn't see why they think it's comforting to make suicide sound like an accidental side effect, rather than intentional. All she knows is that they're all her age and this is number 11 in less than one year.

The smooth, tailored boyfriend of Suicide Lawyer says he's shocked, devastated. Pam shakes her head. "Your fucking fault, isn't it?" she says to the screen, too loudly, flinching when she hears her mother's bitter voice come out of her mouth.

They cut to Suicide Lawyer's father. He sits next to the boyfriend, but doesn't seem to know him at all. The loved ones. "Precocious, fiercely independent..." the father says, looking like this is the most time he has ever spent thinking about his daughter. Pam clicks off the TV.

"It's okay," she mutters, climbing up into the coma pod. Laying down slowly, she closes her eyes. It really is comfortable.

"I'm okay," she repeats softly, over and over. But then she involuntarily conjures her stepfather's memory.

"What are you hiding?" her new father would say, barging into her room and grabbing whatever contraband snack the chubby preteen Pam was munching – huge bags of Doritos, gummy bears by

the pound. “You’ll never get anywhere in life looking like that.”

Steve Connor, the theater critic, waltzed into her mother’s life by the time Pam was 10, and the new duo used to have not-so-quiet arguments about Pam’s weight. And then Steve would come into Pam’s room for a pep talk.

“You’re an American girl. There’s nothing standing in your way. You could have everything you want,” Steve would say, softening, whispering secret advice that excluded her mother and made Pam feel important. “But you need to be smart. Your mother focuses on tit for tat, everything being equal. That never works. What do you really need to do in order to compete? Be twice as good as men.” Then Steve would shrug with a sincere smile. “How hard is that?”

Pam would swell with pride after these talks.

Now she pats her wiggly belly as she lays in the pod. Her mother was utterly slim. Every day was a contest to see how little the woman could eat. But she did feed Pam, who still salivates just thinking of her mother’s fried chicken, biscuits, and gravy. An exquisite cook from the South, her mother would heap the biscuits onto Pam’s plate, lather on gravy, and carefully nestle in crunchy, impossibly juicy pieces of chicken until Pam’s plate was a showpiece of cornucopia. Every dinner plate looked like the cover of *Southern Cooking* magazine, including garnish.

Then she’d pick out a single dry biscuit for herself and place it on a tiny, elaborate china plate. Nibbling it like a mouse, she’d stare through Pam, lost in thoughts that always made her look wistful across the marble kitchen counter.

Pam’s phone rings. She jumps out of the pod.

“You got it,” Greg says. “Have fun. Next time take me with you?”



Pam sits on her white sofa in her apartment, which is now spotless from hours of nervous-energy cleaning and organizing, clutching a cobalt blue glass paperweight like it’s a rosary. She’s completely terrified, with no one to call. It feels like the steely coma pod is staring her down. She tells herself the Monarch Metamorphosis is safe, safer than taking Normal every day and putting on 25 pounds

in a couple of years, that's for sure. Thousands of people have done it, not one bad coma to date.

Three times she starts to call Greg, but she just can't. Pam really wishes someone could know. But there's just no one safe to tell. Even if her mother and stepfather were still alive, she couldn't admit this to them.

The door bell rings, and Pam is happy to see Dr. Voss. He is the perfect amount of tall, in an olive suit that most men couldn't get away with, no tie, and a hint of chest hair peeking out where his top shirt button is left undone. He wears it all like a European aristocrat. It figures that the most attractive man to ever enter her apartment is about to put her in a coma.

"Hello," he says, his eyes warm as he looks her over. "Let's sit down for a minute." Looking around, seeing the Japanese décor, he slips off his shoes by the door. "This really is a gorgeous apartment. Your taste is exquisite."

Pam nods, too nervous for compliments.

"The Metamorphosis should be something you look forward to. If not, it can wait."

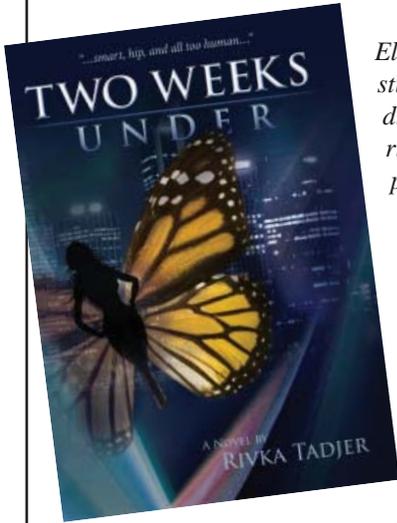
Pam shakes her head. "No! I'm ready for this."

"Personally, I've done a yearly seven-day fast for many years, but the Metamorphosis was definitely my most productive fast to date." Dr. Voss studies her face. "I do believe it had a profound rejuvenating effect on my nervous system. I'm hoping one day to document the neurological link."

"Tell you what," Pam offers, "I'll be a case study of the reborn when I awaken. Just don't use my real name!" She's suddenly giddy as she goes into the bathroom to put on a hospital gown, thinking only: no Deja for two weeks, no Phil in her head. Maybe she'll kick them both like a bad smoking habit.

When Dr. Voss injects Pam with the first dose of the coma drug, she gets woozy immediately. Her last thought before going under is that Deja won't know what hit her when she comes back, with looks to kill.

HOW FAR WOULD YOU GO TO HAVE THE PERFECT BODY?



Elana Diamond's 35th birthday isn't much to celebrate. She's still alone and depressed, so this year the make-a-wish-candles can do you-know-what with themselves. And her arch rival at work, who thanks to her flawless judgment also happens to be her ex-fiance, is being groomed to fire her.

Fighting to keep her job, she can't afford to pay attention to her non-existent personal life, much less the sudden rash of suicides going on in Manhattan—all professional women, all just like her.

Then someone closely connected to Elana becomes the next suicide. She can no longer ignore the dying women, or anything else. An intense, secretive reporter surfaces, claims to be a friend, but he's a little too knowledgeable, a little too curious. Reluctantly, Elana tries to figure out why

the suicide happened, and if this reporter is involved. She finds herself lured into a consuming world of shame and dieting, where going under a medically induced vanity coma to lose weight makes sense.

A kind neurologist tries to help, but when Elana finds out what really happened with the suicide, she's in so deep she might not survive it. Anyone who tries to help her won't either. And no one seems interested in facing the truth. Racing against time, and fighting her own demons, Elana must try to find enough evidence for the truth to be heard, whether or not she makes it.

TWO WEEKS UNDER A NOVEL BY *Rivka Tadjer*

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