

Chapter 1

From below, the entire structure appears to be made of glass.

Ceiling, walls, floor.

A giant bubble suspended a few hundred feet above the courtyard, supported by a complicated arrangement of stainless steel beams and high-tensile wires.

A teardrop caught in a spider's web.

Back on the ground, a young man and a slightly older woman crane their necks, open-mouthed. Though not yet ten, their morning so far has been a blur of over-caffeinated drudgery as they attempted to gouge their way through London's relentlessly congested arteries; a Jubilee Line jumper combining with an Uber strike to create a perfect commuting storm. Even when they'd finally reached their destination, their ordeal was not over, a private militia of security guards insisting on all manner of invasive checks and scans and searches before they'd let them pass. Bags. Shoes. Laptops. Everything had to be rifled through by hand and fed through X-ray machines and metal detectors before they were reluctantly granted access to the inner sanctum of the courtyard. The whole thing was a nightmare.

But all that is forgotten now.

Though they have heard rumours about the company's new British headquarters, nothing has prepared them for

the impossible scale or sheer architectural beauty of the glistening glass orb that dangles high above them in mid-air.

At least, the woman finds it beautiful. The man is not so sure. He is slightly hungover, and for some reason the building makes him feel a little nauseous. Squinting up, he is able to make out the dark undersides of various bits of office equipment. Desks and chairs and printers and water coolers. The utilitarian necessities of any business, no matter how high-tech. Alongside these objects are smaller, lighter shapes, occasionally shifting from one side of the bubble to the other, fluttering like moths trapped under a lampshade. Instinctively he finds himself sliding out his phone and holding it at arm's length, expertly framing his face and the bubble behind him. He gurns, takes a picture and captions it, his smile fading the moment he hits Send.

'So have you got any idea how long this is going to take? I'm supposed to be going to the gym later...'

The woman sighs. Counts backwards from five. 'Let's just play it by ear, shall we? It's taken months to put this together. The last thing I want to do is appear eager to dash off. You should relax, David. Try to enjoy yourself. This is a great opportunity. There are plenty of people who would kill to be here.'

'Yeah, I know. It's just that... Well, formal interviews aren't really my thing. If he's launching a new product, I don't know why he doesn't just throw a press conference like anyone else. Why do we have to traipse halfway across the city just to shoot a stupid video?'

'Because he's *not* just anyone else. He's Xan Brinkley. If he wants to do an interview on the moon, you better believe the rest of us will fight each other for a spot in the rocket. That's how this works. He's a big deal. He calls the shots.'

She takes another deep breath. Softens slightly.

'Look, you're overthinking this. We need to focus on the positives. Yes, he could have called a press conference. But instead he chose to talk exclusively to you. Doesn't that tell you something?'

David shrugs.

'Well, for one thing, it shows he's obviously a big fan of your show.'

'Yeah, right.'

'Are you kidding? Of course he's a fan. And why wouldn't he be? You're a star, David. You're digital dynamite.'

A smirk, a raised eyebrow.

'What? A million subscribers? Six hundred thousand followers? If that's not the definition of a star, then I don't know what is. Okay, so things might have slowed a smidgeon lately, but that's the nature of the beast. You've been doing this for what? Three years now? You're a veteran. A pioneer. Who wouldn't want a piece of that?'

Despite himself, he feels a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips. A slither of ice amongst the spray tan and designer stubble. 'Yeah, well. Maybe you're right.'

'I *know* I'm right. Anyway, even if I'm not, the money that's on the table here is, to put it bluntly, insane. So, stop fixating on the format and let's get in there and...'

Before she can finish, there is a flicker of movement across the courtyard, followed by the knuckle-crack click of high heels across black granite slabs.

A tall, dark haired woman stalks into view, a tablet computer pressed tightly to her cosmetically enhanced chest. She smiles, extends her hand, professionally frosty. Around her wrist is a slim tracker band, the screen of which pulses with a soft green light. 'I'm Katya. We spoke yesterday?'

Sarah shakes her hand, returns the smile. 'It's so lovely to finally meet you in person. And this is David.'

'David. I can't tell you how delighted Xan is that you could make it today. He's a huge fan of the show. We all are.'

There is a trace of a foreign accent, though too faint to pin to anywhere specific. Scandinavian, David thinks. Or Eastern European, perhaps.

'Thank you,' he says automatically. 'That's sweet of you to say.'

There's a slightly awkward pause, while Katya looks him up and down, assessing him as if he were an item of clothing, a piece of furniture. 'You're taller in real life,' she says eventually.

'Oh, well,' he stammers. 'Well, thank you, again. I guess.'

She nods. 'More handsome, too. Now, if you'll come this way please.'

Sarah and David exchange a quick glance before following Katya, who is already halfway across the courtyard by the time they catch her up.

'You made it through security okay?' she asks as they reach her.

Sarah grimaces, tugging at the plastic ID badge dangling from the lanyard around her neck. 'Let's just say I'm glad I wore clean underwear.'

Katya blinks, missing the joke. 'I'm sure you can appreciate that Xan takes his privacy extremely seriously.'

'Sure. To be honest I was surprised he was able to be here in person. Especially with everything that's going on at the moment overseas.'

'Nonsense. He flew in last night especially. He didn't want to miss out on the chance to meet you both. Like I said, we're all incredibly excited you could make it.'

The trio comes to a pause beside a black marble pillar. Stooping slightly, Katya leans her face into a concealed panel and pauses. Keeping her head perfectly still, she pokes out the tip of her tongue, a pink point emerging from between the crimson pillows of her lips.

On the panel beside her, a small red light blinks twice and turns green. The door peels silently back, revealing a mirrored elevator.

'Tongue scanner,' she says in answer to their bewildered stares. 'Just as unique as a retina or a finger print, and far harder to forge. They'll be industry standard within twelve months.' She pauses, allowing herself a small smile. 'Although you do feel a tad silly sometimes.'

As the elevator glides silently upwards, David takes the opportunity to take in their guide properly for the first time. She's a little older than him, he guesses, though it's not easy to tell by how much. Late twenties. Thirty at a push. She's beautiful too, though in a slightly unnerving way, tall and angular, with a jolt of black hair and a complexion so preternaturally clear that she somehow doesn't look quite real. It's her eyes, though, that are the most startling thing about her. Huge and unblinking. The colour of polished slate. They give nothing away.

A moment later the elevator comes to a stop and the doors split apart. As they step out, both David and Sarah give a small, involuntary gasp. The floor is a single, seamless piece of glass, allowing them to look directly onto the courtyard below. It's as if they are walking on nothing but air. David feels his hangover lurching back into the foreground.

'The team here call it the Goldfish Bowl,' Katya says, taking in their apprehensive expressions. 'Don't worry, you get used to it quickly. My advice to new starters is don't look down.'

Glancing around, it certainly seems true that none of the two dozen or so people working in the vast open-plan office are paying the least bit of attention to their unusual surroundings. Rather, the place seems to crackle with a

manic energy. All around them, people are crowded around Perspex standing desks, tapping frantically on laptop keyboards, or speaking animatedly into webcams or headsets, a slew of Mandarin, English and Russian melding together to form a low, indecipherable buzz. Like Katya, everyone is wearing an identical wrist band, the screens of which glimmer a uniform green.

'Our marketing and comms team,' Katya says.

No one else in the room looks up, apparently too absorbed in their respective work to acknowledge the visitors.

'They certainly look busy,' Sarah says.

'Oh, we are. In fact, we've just had to recruit again to keep up with press enquiries. Half these guys have been here less than a fortnight. It's a crazy time for everyone at the moment. Not that I'm complaining,' she adds quickly.

Sarah smiles. 'What was it Oscar Wilde said? That the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about?'

Katya stares at her blankly. 'I'm not sure I follow?'

'I just mean the negative press certainly doesn't seem to have done you any harm,' Sarah says. 'Although having those protestors outside your New York office last week can't have been much fun? Didn't I read something about some of them breaking in and occupying one of your labs?'

Katya shrugs. 'People will always have strong opinions about anything that challenges the status quo. Besides, Xan is eager to stress that this new project is something

completely separate from his other business interests. As far as we're concerned, they're two separate entities altogether.'

'Talking of which, what is this new project exactly? I think you said you were going to send a more detailed proposal through, but I must have missed an email...'

She shoots Sarah a tight smile. 'You know I'd love to get into that, but I think Xan is probably in a better position to answer.'

While the women talk, David drifts over towards the curved wall. By tilting his head a fraction, he is able to make out his reflection in the glass. In preparation for the interview today he has worn a pair of non-prescription glasses, believing they offer him a touch more authority. More class. After all, at twenty-five years old, it's time he was taken more seriously. He slips the glasses off, polishes them on his t-shirt and replaces them. He swallows hard, tasting stale booze and vomit. If he's honest, he doesn't feel very authoritative. He is tired and hungry, his hangover made all the worse by the effort of attending this meeting. There are a thousand other things he would rather be doing right now. Still, this is an important opportunity. At least Sarah seems to think so, and she is rarely wrong about these things. He takes a deep breath. Holds. Exhales. He runs a hand through his hair, mussing it into a loose quiff, then refocuses. He looks through himself.

In the courtyard below he is just about able to see the entrance point where he'd been frisked earlier, a rabble of black-clad security guards still strutting around with crow-like arrogance. Pushing his face closer to the glass, he sees the structure has been engineered in such a way that the various beams and wires that support it are completely invisible from within, giving the impression that the entire bubble is hovering, like an enormous flying saucer. Once again, he finds himself automatically fumbling for his phone, extending his arm above his head in order to capture the view. To his surprise however, he finds the image on the screen registers a nonsensical blur of coloured pixels. Cursing beneath his breath, he brings the device to his face to examine it for cracks.

'Sorry, I meant to tell you,' Katya says, breaking off from her conversation with Sarah. 'Your phone won't work while you're inside the building. Xan insists on installing jammers across all of our sites to deter unauthorised devices.'

Sarah also takes out her phone and checks it, holding up the screen for the others to inspect. 'So it won't work at all?'

'Not up here. I know it's a pain, but it won't do any permanent damage.'

'But this is ridiculous,' David says. 'How are we supposed to film the interview?'

'Everything you need will be provided. In the meantime, I can arrange for a pair of clean phones you can use for the duration of the visit.'

David glances down at the useless black slab in his hand. He feels lost somehow. Adrift in reality.

'It's fine,' he says, swallowing down a surge of anxiety. 'Really.'

Sarah nods in agreement.

'Okay, great. In that case, shall we go and see Xan?'

They allow themselves to be led away from the marketing department, out through a set of Perspex double doors, and along a seemingly endless series of interlinking corridors. Considering the place is almost entirely constructed from transparent materials, the curving architecture makes it surprisingly difficult to see more than a couple of metres in any one direction, and within a few minutes both Sarah and David find themselves utterly without bearings. They follow Katya blindly through a warren of open-plan meeting spaces, all of which are populated by small teams of stylish, wristband-wearing workers, most of whom look to be little older than teenagers. Again, the visitors are resolutely ignored, the young people apparently far too involved in whatever mysterious tasks they're engaged in to offer even a cursory glance in their direction.

At last they come to a pause outside another set of double doors. Unlike the others they've passed, these are frosted, making it impossible to see inside.

'Now before you go in, there's a couple of additional bits of housekeeping I need to get through,' Katya says, holding

up her tablet, along with a stylus. 'If I can just get you both to initial these...'

Sarah's eyebrow arches a fraction. 'I thought we signed everything back at reception?'

'These are just an extra set of terms and conditions, along with our standard non-disclosure agreement. Xan insists on it whenever we're sharing prototype tech with anyone outside the company. Of course, you're welcome to take as long as you like to read over it. I can arrange for a couple of coffees if you'd like?'

'No really, that won't be necessary,' David says, taking the tablet and ticking the box marked Agree. 'I'm pretty sure we can spare the solicitors just this once.'

Sarah manages a pursed smile as she accepts the tablet, entering her details in a flurry of precise stabs before handing it back to Katya.

'Fantastic. Well, I think that about wraps everything up. I'm going to leave you guys to it from here.'

'You're not coming in with us?' David asks.

'Sorry, I'd love to, but I've got another appointment at eleven,' she says. 'Don't worry, though. I've got a feeling we'll be seeing a lot more of each other in the near future.'

With that, she retreats towards the door panel, sticking out her tongue until the red light blinks green.