

## Chapter 2

The first thing is the music. Even before the door has zipped shut behind them, they are startled by the shrill jangle of an electric guitar, a series of wild, bluesy riffs piercing the air, oddly anachronistic amid the space age surroundings. The room itself is almost identical to the others they've passed through. Large and sparsely furnished, flooded with a crisp natural light. The only difference are the walls, which are composed of the same lightly frosted glass as the door, reducing the view outside to an ambiguous smudge of shadows and silhouettes.

Nobody can see into or out of this room.

At the far end of the office, a man stands hunched over a small, tweed-covered amplifier, a battered, antique-looking black guitar slung around his neck. As David and Sarah shuffle towards him, he glances up briefly but doesn't acknowledge them. Instead he keeps playing, his fingers working with feverish dexterity as he grinds out an increasingly frenzied melody.

When they are around fifteen feet from him they stop, repelled by the music, which continues to blast out at earsplitting volume. They shuffle uncomfortably on the spot, exchanging uncertain glances with one another.

Something isn't right.

While the guitarist looks like Xan, he's also different somehow. A little thicker around the waist, perhaps. The

circles around his eyes a little darker. Gone is his usual designer suit, replaced instead by an oversized khaki t-shirt, the armpits and chest of which are blotted with a dark dappling of sweat. His black hair is hidden behind a ratty beanie hat, a few greasy curls spilling out around his ears, while his artfully sculpted designer stubble has sprouted into a scrubby beard. He reminds David of a police composite sketch drawn from a witness's memory. Recognisable at a squint, but still a little off. He actually wonders for a moment if there has been some sort of mistake, if the man thrashing the guitar before them might be an imposter, an employee who just happens to look like Xan. But then the guitarist shifts his weight slightly, and the light picks out the scar running vertically down the left side of his face, from his temple to his jaw. He knows then that there is no mistake.

As impossible as it seems, this really is Xan Brinkley.

The famous scar. An ugly thing, like a long pink worm, jarring against Xan's usually flawless appearance. Even now, hidden behind his grungy, homeless-chic hat and beard, it's startling. Impossible not to stare at. Of course, David knows the story behind it. Everyone knows the story of the scar. It's his trademark of sorts, a feature highlighted in every online biopic about Xan ever written. A neat hook for lazy writers to hang the same old pop psychological theories about his famous perfectionism and ferocious drive.

While the exact details of the accident seem to differ from article to article, the salient points are well established. It was Xan's eleventh birthday and he was returning home

with his family after spending the day at the zoo. About halfway through the journey, Xan's father was distracted by something – an advert on the radio, a noise from the backseat, the iridescent shimmer of a bird exploding into flight – and he somehow allowed the vehicle to creep across the white central line and into the path of an oncoming HGV. The resulting wreck instantly killed him, his wife and his baby daughter, though miraculously left his son Xan unharmed, save for a deep gash to his face. It was this event, postulate the bio writers, which drove Xan's early obsession with computers and coding, the order and precision of which he seemed to prefer over the sloppy fallibility of human interaction. Raised by a rotating roster of relatives and financially comfortable thanks to a sizeable inheritance, the young Xan initially showed great academic promise, receiving a full scholarship to study computer science at Harvard aged just seventeen. It was here he developed a voracious appetite for both marijuana and MDMA, the latter of which he would later credit for a series of epiphanies that led him to drop out of college after just a single term in pursuit of a more 'spiritually fulfilling' path.

After a few aimless years spent bumming around the beaches and backpacker hostels of South East Asia, Xan returned to the States and moved to San Francisco, where he quickly cemented a reputation for both technical brilliance and an unorthodox outlook. Despite lucrative offers from some of Silicon Valley's biggest players, he eventually decided to strike out on his own, forming his own software company. Initially focusing on online fitness and wellbeing applications, a string of early hits in the first eighteen months made him a millionaire. It is his most

recent project though, the increasingly ubiquitous Optimizer brand, that has brought him to the mainstream's attention, not to mention catapulting him into the elite tier of tech billionaires.

Like most of his early businesses, Optimizer provides an elegant solution to a complex problem, in this case the thorny issue of worker productivity. Building on the technology behind his fitness monitoring software, Xan created a simple band that tracks an enormous range of data, including pulse rate, temperature, respiration rate, blood pressure, along with a range of other physiological indicators, in order to gauge how effectively an employee is working. The results are displayed as a simple 'traffic light' system. Green indicates a happy and productive worker, amber suggests room for improvement, while red flags up a slacker. It is the very essence of simplicity.

Predictably the bands were an overnight sensation, with factory and warehouse owners proving particularly enthusiastic supporters, before they were eventually adopted by offices around the world. Since then, the Optimizer band has been refined to the point where it is considered more or less mandatory in most workplaces. Not that the employees seem to mind. In fact, aside from a small but vocal pocket of human rights protestors like those in New York, it is the workers themselves who have proven their loudest proponents. With their sleek, minimalist design, the bands are increasingly seen as a both an iconic fashion statement and a status symbol in their own right, with many people choosing to publish their productivity stats online as a way of promoting their employability. Meanwhile, their ongoing success has seen

Xan canonised at just thirty-eight years old as one of the decade's pre-eminent creative entrepreneurs. A raw, visionary talent, liable to change the face of technology at any given moment.

At least that's what the bio writers say.

David isn't so sure. While Xan doesn't exactly look destitute, he certainly doesn't look like one of the world's most successful business men. In fact, if he didn't know better, he has the impression he could pass him in the street without recognising him. He is utterly anonymous.

The guitar continues to wail, reaching a crescendo now, Xan's eyes screwed tight as he submits himself to the squall and hum of his solo until at last the music subsides, collapsing into a trailing murmur of feedback.

And then nothing.

A few seconds pass before he opens his eyes. He looks around the room, blinking rapidly as if waking from a coma, before he focuses on the two, vaguely confused people standing opposite him. He grins, his beard splitting in two.

'David! Bro! I'm super stoked you could make it here,' he says, his voice thick with a lazy Californian drawl. 'And this must be your... agent?'

'Manager,' Sarah says, proffering her hand 'Sarah. Sarah Stone.'

'Sarah! Katya told me all about you. Sorry, I'm a bit of a mess here. I was just blowing off steam and I lost track of time.'

'Oh, not at all.'

'Yeah, it's cool,' David adds. 'You sounded great.'

'Hey, thanks dude. That means a lot to me, really. You know I've only been playing for a few weeks now, but I'm hooked. I can't put the damn thing down.'

David shakes his head in disbelief. 'A few weeks?'

'Well, it's a great guitar, which helps a lot. Actually, this one used to belong to Eric Clapton. Or was it Jimi Hendrix? Either way, she's a beauty.'

Xan holds up the guitar so that the light bounces off the battered chrome bridge.

'The Stratocaster. Over sixty years old and still nobody's topped it. It's crazy. They still churn these things out today by the thousand, built almost exactly to old Leo Fender's specs. It's so simple, y'know? Little more than steel and wood and wires. And yet at the same time, it also represents the last link in a chain that stretches all the way back to the Ancient Greeks. Literally thousands of years, each new designer clambering onto the shoulders of the last, until finally they reached this point. The apex of evolution. But hey, don't take my word for it. Have a try yourself.'

Xan holds out the guitar for David to take.



'Oh, but I don't really play.'

'What are you talking about? I saw the video you put up last year. The Ramones thing. You slayed it, dude!'

David's smile strains further. 'Really, I couldn't. I know maybe three chords, if that. That video took an hour to shoot. You should see the blooper reel.'

'Ah, come on. I insist. This is no time for false modesty my friend.'

Beside him, David can sense Sarah tensing. The last thing he wants to do is appear ungrateful. And so with a reluctant nod he takes the guitar and loops the strap around his neck. 'Sure. Why not.'

'Hey, should we be filming this?' Sarah asks. 'It might make a nice segment for the interview.'

Xan ignores her, instead crouching to adjust the amp. There is a crunch of bum notes, as David's fingers fumble for the strings, the mangled first chords of 'Blitzkrieg Bop' ringing out. He winces in embarrassment.

'I warned you I was terrible.'

'Nonsense!' Xan yells over the din. 'You just need to loosen up a bit!'

David continues to strum half-heartedly, his pained expression deepening. Xan on the other hand beams, his eyes shimmering with something approaching rapture.

‘There, you see? You’re getting it!’

He has barely finished shouting when the music abruptly changes, the atonal whine of a few seconds earlier making way for a sweeter, more polished melody. David glances down in surprise. It’s as if his fingers are moving of their own volition, smoothly sliding from note to note. He has abandoned the punky thrash altogether now, spontaneously switching to a series of jazzy chord progressions, his right hand picking out a faster, funkier rhythm.

‘I didn’t know you were this good?’ Sarah shouts.  
‘Seriously, we should totally be filming this...’

David doesn’t answer. He can’t. All he can do is stare down at his fingers as they spider their way across the fretboard, his eyes wide with confusion as the music grows ever more complex, a disorientating blur of riffs and runs seemingly plucked from thin air and executed at breakneck speed.

‘Yeah, man!’ Xan yells above the noise. ‘You’re slaying it right now! Didn’t I tell you it was a great guitar?’

David hardly hears him. He’s sweating now, his glasses steamed up. Salty pearls of perspiration slide down his forehead and sting his eyes. He blinks manically, but doesn’t stop to wipe them, his whole body gripped by the music, the notes stacking up on top of one another to create discordant yet strangely beautiful harmonies. Sarah watches, transfixed as David hunches over, his hair a smear of brown across his face, his body twitching and



contorting in time with every yelp and squeal of the guitar. He looks as if he is exorcising a demon.

At last, just when it seems he will never end, Xan reaches down and fiddles with the amp. Immediately the music gurgles to a stop, leaving David standing there dazed, drained of all energy.

‘Jesus, David,’ Sarah says. ‘You’ve got to do it again. We’ll film it properly this time. Do you realise what this could mean? You could start a separate channel. A blog, a book, play-along-lessons. The possibilities are *endless*...’

Very gently, Xan reaches forward and takes the guitar from around his shoulders.

‘So did you enjoy that?’ he asks, a faint smile burrowing in the nest of his beard.

David doesn’t look up. He is staring at his hands, a look of intense confusion etched across his brow. ‘The guitar,’ he mumbles. ‘I don’t understand? It felt like... it felt like it was playing me.’

At this, Xan actually laughs. ‘That’s frickin’ astute, dude. I knew I asked you here for a reason. You’re right. That’s more or less exactly what it was doing.’

Both David and Sarah look sharply at him.

‘Okay, hands up. I tricked you. I totally should have told you first. But that would have spoiled the surprise. I wanted you to experience it for yourself.’

‘Experience what?’ David asks.

'Listen, when I said old Leo's Strat was unsurpassable, I wasn't exactly being straight with you. Everything can be improved. Evolution doesn't just stop. There's always someone waiting in the wings, ready to take the next step. So that's what we did with the guitar. We evolved it.'

'I'm lost.'

'Well, without getting bogged down in the science, we basically re-engineered the guitar so that the strings act as an interface, transmitting signals between the computer – which in this case is concealed in the amplifier – and your brain. By sending tiny electromagnetic cues we are able to manipulate your nervous system, encouraging you to play the right notes.'

David takes off his fake glasses and massages his temples. 'I'm not sure I understand? You're saying you *programmed* me to play like that?'

'Mmmm, kind of. Although the buzz word here is *encouraged*. You can still choose to ignore the impulses. But if you relax enough and let the strings guide you... Well, you get to be a total badass!'

'But I didn't feel a thing?'

'Right? And even when you know what's happening, the signals are so small that they're virtually imperceptible. It's totally harmless too, which means literally anyone can plug in and instantly play perfectly, from little kids to old Grandpa Joe down at the nursing home. There's no need for expensive lessons or thousands of hours of boring practice anymore. It democratises the whole thing. Now we can all be as good as Slash or Prince or Jimi without

the years of hard work or God-given talent. And it doesn't stop there. We're hoping one day to integrate it with piano, drums, saxophone. It could change everything. If it's ever released that is...'

'If?' David says. 'But this thing's amazing. It'll be the biggest tech story of the century. People will go crazy for it.'

'Absolutely,' Sarah says, nodding in agreement. 'The potential for viral content is huge. Now if we can just get some footage of David playing it again...'

Xan sighs. 'You know I'm pleased you guys are as excited about this thing as me. I really am. But the reality is that there just isn't enough of a market for this kind of product for it to be viable. I mean, when's the last time you saw a kid pick up a guitar? Or any instrument, really? Maybe if we'd come up with this thing in the mid-90s. No, as it stands this is more of what you'd call a pet project of mine. It's just a bit of fun.'

David shakes his head. 'But I don't understand? If you're not going to launch it then why did you invite me here this morning?'

Xan's smile returns. He places the guitar carefully down beside the amp and then wraps an arm around David's shoulder. He leans in, so close that David can smell the stale perspiration seeping from his t-shirt, the sour coffee on his breath.

'Oh, I've got something more exciting to show you than this, David. Something much, much more exciting. And believe me, this thing really *will* rock your world.'