

## Chapter 6

'You've made the right decision. I mean, I would have preferred you'd told me *before* you announced it to the world. But it's fine. I'm just happy you've made up your mind. And Xan is delighted, obviously. I've already spoken to his people. They're sending over the paper work as we speak. They want to know if you're free this Friday to have the implant fitted? David? David...?'

'I...'  
David begins, his eyes scrunched tight, his voice no more than a whisper. 'Hang on.'

He lets the phone drop to the floor. Even with his eyes closed, he can tell that something is wrong. Something about the texture of the air. The quality of the too-bright-light. This is not his bed. This is not his room. He takes a deep breath, then forces back one raw eyelid. Gradually the world swims into focus. Even then it takes him a few seconds to understand that he is sprawled fully dressed on his living room floor.

'Hello? David, are you there?'

Somewhere nearby Sarah continues to talk, her voice a nasal whine. A wasp trapped in a jar. He turns his head slightly, wincing in pain. A nebula of stars crashes across his vision. Everything hurts.

'David? David?'

His fingers crawl the floorboards until at last he locates his phone.

'I'm going to have to call you back.'

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Twenty minutes later, David has made it to his feet and into the shower. He stands there motionless for what seems like hours, molten needles pummelling his wretched body. He is sore and tender all over, his muscles aching as though he'd lunged his way through an aerobics class. He tries to piece together the events of last night. There was the disastrous interview with Alice. Nadeem's pills. And then...

Nothing.

He scratches at a dark stain on the back of his hand. A stamp from a nightclub he doesn't remember going to. On his thigh there is a large, blueberry coloured bruise. Again, he has no idea how it happened. From midnight onwards, everything is gone.

Eventually he manages to drag himself from the scalding sanctuary of the shower and gets dressed. Staggering around his apartment, he finds cryptic mementos from the night before. A full bottle of beer on his countertop. A broken glass in the kitchen. His keys and bankcard lying in the hallway. A phone number scrawled on a scrap of paper in handwriting he doesn't recognise. He begins to make a coffee, but the smell makes him retch. He settles for a glass of water instead, before finally working up the courage to check his phone.

Ever since Sarah's early morning call, he's been delaying this moment. One of the first – if not only – rules of video making, is not filming yourself wasted. While makers like him weren't exactly required to provide PG-rated content, a large proportion of their demographic was nevertheless teenage, and on a slow news week it didn't take much for a desperate journalist to twist an off-colour comment into a full-blown moral panic. Even deleting a video was no guarantee of escape – if anything it was more likely to draw unwanted attention, encouraging an inevitable series of suspicious-looking screen grabs to resurface from the bowels of the Internet. Over the years he's watched far too many friends crash out of business after having their unguarded drunken remarks picked up by mainstream news vultures.

Logging in, he sees that three videos have been uploaded, all between four and five am. His stomach lurches. The first two are only a couple of seconds long, bleary interior shots of a club. An abstract smear of neon lights and dry ice, a distorted bass line drowning out whatever insanity he was rambling. The final video, however, is shot inside a taxi. Mercifully it's too dark to make out his sunken cheeks or saucer-like pupils, though his voice is distressingly slurred as he rambles about meeting Xan to his viewers, telling them that he is looking forward to taking part in a new show, that more details will be coming soon. The video ends. It has thirty thousand likes. He takes a deep breath. There is nothing incriminating here, beyond perhaps a slight breach of confidentiality. The main thing is that it's out there now. It's decided. He's doing the show. Everything else will fall into place, of that he's sure. He

resolves to celebrate by going back to bed. There is no way around it. Today is not going to happen.

He has hardly heaved himself to his feet, when his doorbell rings. He freezes. As far he can remember he isn't expecting any parcels. And none of his friends would call round without ringing first. He glances at his phone. Already he has received a dozen or so congratulatory messages about the show. Not one of them mentions visiting him in person though.

The bell rings again, shrill and insistent.

Swallowing down a ball of anxiety, he goes to the hall. He takes a deep breath, rearranges his face into something he hopes looks half-human, and peels back the door.

'Oh, hey David. Sorry I'm a few minutes early.' Alice pauses to take in his dishevelled appearance, the look of confusion on his face. 'You did say twelve, right?'

'Um...'

'Shit. You don't remember do you? I knew you were drunk. You left me a voicemail at some ridiculous time this morning. You said you wanted to tell me about this new show you were doing while it was still fresh? And then I saw the video this morning and... Look, don't worry about it. You're obviously still... It's fine. Just a mix up. We can do this another time if you like? When you're feeling more...'

'No, it's cool,' David says, forcing a smile. 'Now is good. It's very good. And I totally remember calling you last night.'

'Totally. Come in, come in.'

He takes a step back, then changes his mind.

'On second thoughts, maybe we should go and do this outside somewhere? It's such a nice day.' His composure cracks. He grins awkwardly, a child caught telling a lie. 'And also I think I'm probably going to pass out if I don't get some fresh air.'

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'Where the hell are you taking me?'

Still too delicate to make any decisions, David trails Alice blindly through the bustling carnage of the midday streets. Though he has lived in Central London for over three years, today the sights, smells and sounds are overpowering. The air is heavy with a rancid fug of exhaust gases and cooking oil, the takeaways that line the road already doing a brisk trade in carcinogen-fried chicken. The incessant growl of traffic sets his teeth on edge. As they weave unsteadily through the crush of pedestrians, he is repulsed by the scum-flecked tide of humanity pressing down on him. Street vendors hawking fake Ray-Bans and Louis Vuitton handbags. Businessmen yammering into their Bluetooth-headsets. Overweight teenagers glued to their iPhones. They all walk too close to him, intent not just on invading, but colonising his personal space, contaminating him with their bad breath and their body odour. It takes all of his inner strength not to curl into a ball and weep.

After a couple of sharp turns, they leave the crowd behind as he follows Alice down a deserted back alley which runs parallel to the main road. Despite his fragile mental state, he is alert to the fact that they seem to be heading into an increasingly unsavoury spot, the dark walls of the passageway daubed with blood-red graffiti, the cobbles glittering with broken glass. As he often does when travelling around the city, he pictures himself as a blue dot drifting across a satellite map. Right now though, the blue dot seems to be perilously close to falling off the edge of the screen.

Before he can voice his concerns, the alley opens unexpectedly to reveal a green wasteland, fringed by a thick knot of trees. The open space makes him nervous.

‘Seriously, what are we doing here?’

‘What do you mean? You said you wanted some fresh air.’

‘Exactly. I didn’t say I was a serial rapist-murderer looking for somewhere to dump my latest victim.’

‘Come on, it’s not that bad. My dad used to take me here all the time when I was little. We used to call it the Secret Park. Although I have to admit, it’s looking a little unloved these days.’

‘Understatement of the year? This is literally the creepiest place I’ve ever been.’ He nods towards the trees. ‘I feel like I’m being watched.’

Alice grins. ‘As opposed to every other moment of your life?’

'You know what I mean.'

They keep walking, picking their way through the long grass before eventually coming to a stop before a large, brown lake. They stare out in silence for a moment, a lone swan cutting its way across the water, leaving half a dozen brown ducks bobbing in its wake.

'Look, joking aside, I've been thinking about last night,' she says. 'The meal. Some of what I said was unfair. I didn't mean for you to think...'

'To think you were a complete bitch?'

Alice holds her hands up. 'I deserve that. I mean, there I am getting snippy with you for not answering questions on the minutiae of your life, when you don't know the slightest thing about me. It's hardly surprising you don't feel like opening up to a stranger.'

'It's fine. Forget about it.'

'So you accept my apology?'

'Sure.'

'Okay good, because I have an idea that I think will help us get back on track. How about for every question I ask you, you get to ask me one back? That way, instead of me just grilling you endlessly, it turns it into a two-way process. You get to know me and I get to know you. So what do you say?'



He closes his eyes. He feels hollowed out, his stomach burning, his thoughts slow and tangled. 'You want to do this now? As in, today?'

'Come on David. You know I'm up against it here. We're both contractually obliged to drag this book into existence – we can at least try to make the experience as painless as possible.'

A deep sigh. 'Fine. We can do it now. But I can't promise I won't vomit. So, what do you want to know?'

'Actually, why don't you go first? I still owe you one from last night.'

'I don't know.' He sighs. 'Fine. Tell me about your family. Have you got a family?'

'Yes,' she laughs. 'I have a family. Parents. Both alive. Early sixties. Hate each other's guts but haven't got the imagination to call it a day. They like to brag about my job at parties but openly resent the fact I'm yet to provide them with grandchildren and secretly wonder if I might be a lesbian.'

'And are you a lesbian?'

'Sorry, but that's another question.'

'Damn. Okay, okay. I'll stick to family. What about siblings?'



'Two. I'm a middle child. You know, the forgotten one? Starved of attention, destined to a lifetime of hopping up and down, waving my hands in the air and all that crap. I have an older sister, Rebecca, who is totally fine. She's a teacher. Couple of kids. Drives a four-by-four. Lives with her dentist husband in the leafy suburbs. Just a living stock image titled *Happy Functional Family*. And I am absolutely not judging her for it. Not at all. Oh, and I have a younger brother too.'

'What's he like?'

'Nick? Yeah he's cool. Or at least he was. He's kind of broken at the moment. He's supposed to be getting married this weekend, though who knows if he'll actually make it seeing as he nearly died on his stag do last month. He's currently in hospital recovering from double pneumonia.'

'Jeez. And I thought I liked to party. Sounds like a hell of a night?'

'That's the thing, he didn't even get trashed. Apparently there's some weird company whose job it is to grab drug addicted teens and drag them out into the wilderness, to scare them clean or whatever. I think it was an American thing originally. Anyway, for whatever reason Nick's asshole *friends* decided it would be hilarious to hire these clowns to do the same thing to my baby brother.'

'What, so they had him professionally kidnapped?'

'Nice, right? Poor Nick was driving to work one day when four guys in balaclavas pulled up alongside him and

literally dragged him out of his car. They then proceeded to put a hood over his head, tied him up and put him in the back of a transit van, before driving him a hundred miles, stripping him naked and dumping him in the middle of nowhere.'

'Ah man, that's genius,' David laughs. 'Please tell me they filmed it?'

'Sadly not. Although it seems they did take pity and left him with a skateboard to make his way home on.'

'So what happened?'

'Oh, not much. He spent a day-and-a-half skating in the wrong direction, caught hypothermia, which later turned into pneumonia, and was eventually arrested by some yokel country cop for indecent exposure. As I said, nice friends.'

'Yeah, that's not great. But you have to admit that it's kind of funny?'

'Try telling his fiancée that. He's actually been diagnosed with PTSD from the stress of it all. Anyway, that's enough about me. My turn?'

David gives a resigned nod. 'Shoot.'

'Great.' She reaches into her bag and produces an ancient-looking tape recorder.

'Wait. Who the hell are you? A time-traveller from the nineties?'

'My dictaphone?'

David laughs. 'You know there's about a hundred apps that do that now? Like, where do you even still get tapes for that thing? Actually, can I take a photo of you holding it?' he says, reaching for his phone. 'My followers are going to go batshit when they see it.'

'What? No,' she snaps. 'I don't want you taking my picture. I don't even see what's so amusing. Just because it's not shiny and new and didn't cost thousands of pounds. Besides, it gets the job done. I've used it for years.'

'Okay, relax, *Mum*. But I have to say, you've never sounded so old. I bet you have a landline and everything, right? A dial-up modem?'

'Very funny. Can we get on with this?' She takes a breath, hits Record. 'So, what's the deal with this new show? What was it called again? MindCast? I've tried looking online but I can't find anything about it. And what about Xan Brinkley? How's he involved? I thought he'd be too busy screwing over low-paid workers by convincing them to electronically tag themselves?'

'Now come on, Ali. You know I'm not supposed to be talking about any of this.'

'And yet you were happy enough to talk about it at five o'clock this morning. Besides, I spilled the beans about my pathetically pedestrian family. You've got a debt to settle, mister.'

David stoops down and selects a flattish rock from the ground. He grips it tightly between his thumb and forefinger, before launching it at the lake. It skips, once,

twice, three times before sinking beneath the grey slab of water.

‘Fine,’ he says, turning back to Alice. ‘Although there’s really not that much to tell. Xan Brinkley – who it turns out is actually a really nice guy – invited me over to discuss his idea for a new reality show. He’s developed a small microchip that they insert into me that translates my brainwaves into pictures. Or something. Basically it’s kind of like what I do now, but instead of having to film everything, my thoughts appear directly on the screen.’

Alice stares at him, trying to work out whether he’s joking or not. ‘What do you mean, your thoughts appear on the screen?’

‘It’s just like a dictaphone, right?’ He nods at her recorder. ‘But instead of words it records thoughts, along with dreams, memories. Everything.’

‘Sounds kind of... farfetched? And you say they *insert* a chip into you? As in surgically?’

‘There’s a minor operation involved, yes. It’s nothing though. Keyhole. No scar. I’ll be back out by Saturday.’

‘This Saturday? Christ, David. You’re really serious about this thing?’

‘It’s a huge opportunity.’

‘I’m sure it is. It’s just...’ she catches herself. ‘No, you’re right. Congratulations. I’m just surprised it’s happening so quickly. But I’m sure you’ll do a great job. Much better than I would, anyway.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Well it’s just I don’t always say what I’m thinking. I mean sometimes I think crazy stuff. I’d simply die if anyone could see how neurotic I really am. And as for my dreams... But maybe that’s just me?’

He sniffs. ‘Some of us are just more open than others I guess.’

‘Right.’

They lapse into an uneasy silence. Alice hits pause on her recorder. ‘So do you want to ask me another question?’

‘You know, if it’s okay with you I’d like to leave it there for today? I’ve just got so much stuff I need to do.’

‘Oh. I mean, no worries. Maybe we can pencil something in for next week?’

They make their way back through the abandoned park, neither saying much. As they reach the end of the alleyway they say a stiff goodbye, before Alice surprises David by leaning in for a hug.

‘Good luck for Friday,’ she says as they break apart. ‘I mean it.’

‘Luck? Listen, if I can make it through today in one piece, Friday will be a breeze. Trust me.’