

## Chapter 7

David opens his eyes. He reaches for his phone. He holds it at arm's length. He hits Record. He says: *Good morning, guys*. He hits Send. Then he gets up, showers, gets dressed, and orders a taxi.

Today is Friday.

Today is the day.

As he drags his overnight bag down the stairs and into the street, it occurs to him how much has changed since meeting Alice three days earlier. Since then, his life has been swallowed by a landslide of meetings and briefings. Photoshoots have been arranged. PR campaigns have been scheduled. Interviews lined up. His phone has hardly stopped vibrating. There have been two separate medical check-ups where he was weighed and measured. Prodded and sampled. Meanwhile, Sarah calls almost hourly, harrying him to sign various documents and contracts. He is up to his eyeballs in terms and conditions and small print, all of it written in meaningless legalese, his inbox expanding, exploding. He agrees to everything without reading it, scrawling an x in every box with the tip of his stylus.

X

X

X

Buried treasure.

Careless kisses.

Though on one hand he relishes being so busy – busier than he has been in his entire life – he is still slightly uneasy about the veil of secrecy surrounding the project. While he continues to shoot his show as normal, the original video containing his MDMA-fuelled announcement has been taken down, and he is under strict instructions not to mention anything else relating to MindCast until after the official launch. This is uncharted territory for David. For the last three years, he has offered an unrestricted window into his life. No detail has been held back. His numerous one night stands. His concerns about his thinning hairline. His preposterously messy break up with Ella. Nothing has been judged too personal or off-limits. Now though, he finds himself in the position where he is legally required to hold something back from his fans. It feels like a betrayal. Worse still, the lack of information has left a void that some of his less balanced fans have attempted to fill themselves. Already the first green shoots of conspiracy theories are blossoming in the comments sections of his most recent videos. One viewer is claiming that the real David has been abducted and

replaced by an identical imposter, while another insists he had proof of a blackmail plot. Though it's easy enough to chalk up the chatter to obsessives and crazies, the situation nevertheless leaves a sour taste in his mouth. He looks forward to next week, when things will finally get back to normal.

The taxi journey is surprisingly quick, and before he knows it he is pulling up outside the familiar grey building that houses the glass orb. As he crawls through security, his stomach gurgles. Bitter metal floods his mouth. Due to the anaesthetic, he has not eaten a thing since last night, and as he submits himself to a second body search he begins to feel light-headed. He had hoped he might skip these theatrics, especially as he was apparently now so integral to the fortunes of the company they were there to protect. The guards remain impassive though, processing him with the poker-faced detachment of a doctor's receptionist handling a stool sample. There is a process to be followed. Boxes to tick. Everything is double-checked before he is begrudgingly allowed to pass.

Although he is slightly early for his appointment, he is pleased to find Katya already waiting for him in the courtyard. She greets him with an affectionate hug, pulling him so close he can taste her expensive perfume.

'David! *So* excited to see you again. How are you?'

'Nice to see you too. I'm good. A little nervous, I guess. But I'm good.'

'That's completely natural. But really, there's nothing to worry about. Xan wanted me to tell you that Doctor Khan, who's performing the operation today, is his own private physician. In other words, you're in good hands.'

'Xan isn't around himself?'

'Ah. Not today. He had to fly back to the States unexpectedly last night.'

'The trouble in New York?'

Katya swats at an invisible fly. 'It's nothing. He should be back by the time you wake up tomorrow. Anyway, forget all that. Are you ready to make history?'

\*

Like the rest of the building, the hospital ward is constructed entirely of glass. Not the opaque, frosted stuff that lines Xan's private office, but completely transparent, without even so much as a curtain to hide behind. After he's said goodbye to Katya, David changes self-consciously into the green robes provided for him, crouching awkwardly behind a heart monitor and IV drip, attempting to shield himself from the eyes of the workers who occasionally pass by. Not that any of them so much as

glance at him. As before, the whole place is a breathless hive of activity, the young employees hardly looking up from their phones or tablets as they charge down the corridors that surround the ward.

He has only just finished changing when the double doors gasp open and a sharply groomed middle-aged man walks in, accompanied by a young male nurse.

‘David,’ he says as he extends his hand, an expensive watch flashing from beneath the sleeve of his crisp white jacket. ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you. And how are we feeling today?’

Before he has a chance to answer, the nurse is by his side, rolling up a sleeve, fastening an inflatable cuff around his arm.

‘We’ll administer the anaesthetic here and then wheel you down to surgery,’ the doctor continues. ‘I just have a few routine questions to ask first.’

While the nurse continues to fuss around David, the doctor runs through a list of things David has already answered before. Allergies. Medications. Medical history. As he checks off the answers on his tablet, David has the sudden impression that none of this is real. The doctor is too handsome, his lines too polished. It is as if they are both actors in a hospital soap opera. They are both just playing their part.

When he's finished, Doctor Khan asks David to hop onto the trolley while the nurse slides a needle into the back of his hand and then tapes a thin plastic cannula into place.

'Great,' the doctor says, exhaling a wave of mint in his direction. 'If you just lie back and make yourself comfortable. That's it. Now, you may feel a slightly warm, tingling sensation in your arm.'

As David sinks into the pillow, he stares up. High above him, he can make out the faint shadows of MindCast employees. Scuttling. Skittering. It makes him think of an ant farm he had as a kid. He gives a sharp intake of breath as the drugs enter his bloodstream, so cold it burns. He pictures liquid metal pumping into his veins.

'Just relax and count backwards from ten.'

David glances down the bed to where the doctor is standing, his face set in a professional rictus.

'Ten.'

The coldness has spread to his chest now, his ribs like the branches of a frozen tree. It's a struggle to breathe, but he's too tired to panic. Too tired to...

'... Nine...'

The world is fading out, his own voice no more than a distant murmur. He looks down the bed again, but the

doctor has gone. Unable to move his head or neck, his eyes flicker around the room until he spots the faint shape of a person standing just behind the glass wall at the back of the room.

‘...Eight ...’

The person leans closer, pushing their face up against the glass so that David can make out a ragged beard. A beanie hat. A pink scar.

‘...Seven ...’

Xan?

‘...Six ...’

Xan is mouthing something through the glass. He is trying to tell David something.

‘...F ...’

Something important.

‘...i ...’

Something he’s forgotten.

‘...v ...’

And then.