

Chapter 8

Blink.

I'm awake.

I'm not sure I've even been asleep. All I did was...

Blink.

There's something on my face. Pinching at my jaw.
Suffocating me.

Panic.

I reach up, yank it away.

Gasp for air. Then look to see what I'm holding. A plastic oxygen mask, soft and jelly-like. The kind flight attendants use in their safety demonstrations.

In the event of a catastrophic loss of cabin pressure.

My hand hurts. Sharp. Like teeth. A snake? Something snagged. A silver thread trailing from the back of my hand. Perhaps it really is a snake? Or maybe I'm just...

Unravelling.

Blink.

I remember.

The hospital.

The anaesthetic.

Xan?

And then...

Blink.

I'm awake. Really awake this time. I look around. Glass walls, ceiling, floor. A bed with no curtain. A drip. A heart monitor. It's almost identical to the room I was in before. Almost, but not quite. The angles are different. The light artificial. The glass corridors surrounding the room are deserted. I'm alone.

I reach my hand to my head and feel a tight wrap of gauze. A slight sting at the base of my skull. I wonder what time it is? What day? It feels like seconds.

Centuries.

I slip a hand beneath the sheets and fumble for my phone. I'm still wearing nothing but a robe, totally naked below the waist.

No pockets. No phone.

Nothing.

I have no idea where my things are.

My whole head is beginning to hurt now. My eyes feel swollen and itchy in their sockets. I'm thirsty too. And ravenously hungry, though my stomach feels shrivelled and tender, as if I've been repeatedly punched.

I'm about to call out, when I notice a small green light blinking on the ceiling.

A camera.

I'm being watched.

Seconds later there's a sharp hiss as the door slides open and Doctor Khan bounces in. Behind him, the nurse.

'David. Glad to see you're awake. How are you feeling?'

I open my mouth to speak, but no words will come.

I try to sit up.

'Ah-ah. You need your rest.'

Somewhere behind me the nurse fusses with the various monitors. He pushes buttons, turns dials, as if I am a machine being finely tuned.

'I'll brief you properly a little later,' the doctor continues. 'I just wanted to let you know that the operation was a complete success.'

'That's great,' I say, at last managing to wrench a few words from my parched throat. 'Do you think I could get a drink?'

Almost before I've finished speaking, a plastic tumbler appears from somewhere. I drink greedily, cool water sloshing down my chin, while the nurse fiddles with the cannula stabbed into the back of my free hand. When I have finished I glance down, just in time to see the white bulge of his thumb, a syringe of clear liquid pumping into me.

'What the...?'

'Just a light painkiller for your head,' the doctor explains.
'You'll be a little sore for a day or two. This one will also help you get some sleep.'

Even as he speaks I feel my eyelids drooping, my vision smearing to a blur. The doctor says something else, but the words sound distant and distorted. As my head lolls back onto the pillow, I sense both him and the nurse beginning to retreat.

'He-ey,' I slur. 'Wait a minute...'

I lift my head slightly, fighting oblivion.

'What is it?' the doctor says, his voice a distant echo from another galaxy.

'The show,' I say. 'When's it starting?'

Though I can no longer see him, this time I can hear the smile on his face.

'It already has.'

*

'Well good morning. Or should that be good afternoon?'

A woman.

A woman is speaking to me.

Is that... my mother?

Blink.

I'm awake.

The room blossoms into view.

This time things look a little different. Brighter, airier, daylight streaming in through the walls and windows. Katya is standing over me, her ever-present tablet tucked under one arm. 'Ah good. You're alive. For a moment I thought we'd killed you.'

'No,' I croak. 'Still here. Just about.'

As I speak I'm suddenly aware of how terrible I look and smell. I make an effort to sit up, running a hand through my tangled hair. As I do, I spot the other person standing just behind her. A man I haven't seen before.

'Just as well. Lawsuits can be so time consuming,' she says, handing me a glass of water. She doesn't smile, and it's difficult to tell if she's joking or not. 'Anyway, Doctor Khan tells me you're making an excellent recovery. In fact, you should be fine to go home in a couple of hours.'

I drink gratefully, while at the same looking over at the strange looking man standing next to her. He's nothing like the painfully sophisticated young people I've seen on my other visits here. His hair is dark and greasy, fashioned in a classic schoolboy bowl cut, with a pair of thick black glasses perched halfway down the bridge of his sharp nose. Meanwhile his gangly frame juts out at awkward angles beneath an ugly grey jumper. Though he's clearly in his early twenties, there's a pale, sickly sheen to his skin that makes me think he'd be more at home in a dim basement than in this glistening spaceship of a building.

'David, this is Paul,' Katya says, following my gaze. 'He's the one who coded the chip. It's him we have to thank for making MindCast possible.'

Paul gives a small nod, then stares intensely at his feet.

‘Well in that case, thanks Paul,’ I say. ‘Talking of MindCast, when do I get to see the show? Didn’t I hear the doc say it was already streaming?’

Katya nods. ‘He’s right. Actually, we went live within thirty minutes of the operation finishing. Xan’s decided to use these initial days as a sort of soft launch, so while we’re open for business, we’re just not shouting about it yet. It gives us a bit of time to work out any bugs.’

‘Xan’s still not back?’

‘Ah, no. Things are just taking longer in New York than he’d anticipated. The good news is that everything seems to be working exactly as it should be. Isn’t that right, Paul.’

Paul mutters something indecipherable, still not looking up. By now he’s stooping so far forward he seems to be in danger of dislocating his neck, as if attempting to fold inside himself and disappear, an act of human origami.

‘We’ve already picked up around five thousand followers in the last twenty-four hours,’ Katya continues. ‘And that’s with no publicity at all.’

I smile, her enthusiasm infectious. ‘So, do I get to see it or what?’

Without another word, she turns the tablet around to face me, pressing her thumb to the scanner. The screen flickers into life. I lean forward, trying to make out what I’m supposed to be looking at. In the top left corner of the screen is a watermark, the familiar ‘MC’ logo that is plastered around the building, two silver consonants in a

loose, spidery handwriting, a font that is no doubt designed to be both kooky and approachable. Apart from that though, there is nothing but a pale, orange dot in the centre of the screen and a view counter in the bottom right, red digits that currently read:

Live: 5071

I stare at the orange dot for a few seconds then look back to Katya.

‘I don’t get it.’

‘I know you don’t,’ she says grinning. ‘That’s why you’re reading blue.’

‘Blue?’

I glance back down at the screen and see that the dot has changed. It is now glowing a bright cornflower blue. ‘I thought this thing was supposed to show what I’m thinking?’

‘Just keep watching,’ Katya says.

I stare at the dot. After a few seconds I realise that rather than a static shape, it is actually moving slightly, its edges constantly expanding and contracting by a few pixels, like a ribcage rising and falling. It’s almost as if it’s breathing. Leaning closer, I see too that the colour is not fixed, but rather it shimmers mysteriously, from blue to purple to orange and back again. It’s pretty, I guess, though I still have no idea what it has to do with me or why I’m being asked to look at it. I’m about to say as much to Katya, when out of nowhere she reaches forwards and grabs hold of my nose, pinching it violently.

'YAGGHHH!' I yell, as much in shock as in pain.

On the tablet, the small dot instantly explodes, expanding to fill the screen with a flash of white, before quickly receding to a tiny red pin prick, no larger than a sniper's sight.

'What the hell? Are you crazy?'

'Did you see it though?' Katya asks, ignoring my protests. 'Pain. We can't track it. Totally overpowers the system – everything's firing at once. It's incredible, no?'

'What are you talking about?' I snap, cupping my nose protectively. 'You can't just go around assaulting people for no reason.'

'But that's the whole point. It wouldn't have worked if I told you what I was about to do. We would have got... what would we have got Paul?'

'Orange,' Paul mumbles.

'Of course! Orange for anticipation.'

I look back at the tablet, where the little red dot is still simmering in the centre of the screen. 'I'm lost,' I say, fighting the urge to throw a tantrum.

'I know, it's confusing. It took me a while to get my head around it too. Paul, why don't you explain? You're better at the science than me.'

With what seems like an immense effort, Paul lifts his head from the ground, fixing me with a slightly cross-eyed stare. 'So I believe Xan briefed you on the basics?' he begins, his voice a pinched monotone.

'Um?'

A sigh. 'So the electrode implant detects the areas being fed with oxygenated blood and then feeds the results into a pattern classifier to interpret the signal, creating a simulation which we then stream in real-time on the screen.'

I take a long breath. 'Okay, okay. I get all that. But when Katya demonstrated it there were pictures? It was like a movie or something. You could see what was going on. There was more than just this stuff.'

'I believe what you saw was the beta demonstration reel,' he sniffs. 'However, before we reach that stage, the simulation needs to be tailored to the individual. That *stuff*, as you call it, is a precise visual representation of your emotional responses, with different colours ascribed to each mood. It's based on Plutchik's wheel.'

'My emotional responses?'

'So basically it shows a different colour depending on how you're feeling,' Katya chimes in. 'Do you remember mood rings from when you were a kid? It's a bit like that. Only in this case, serenity is lemon chiffon. Loathing is amethyst.'

'So what does red mean?'

Katya laughs. 'Carnelian red?' she says, pointing at the screen. 'I believe that translates as rage. I guess you're still angry about your nose? But I'd say from the dash of terracotta you're also a little intrigued and... Thistle? What's that again?' she turns to Paul. 'Confused?'

'Boredom,' Paul says.

'Okay, wow. So you're witnessing the greatest entertainment innovation since television and you're bored? I'm sure Xan will be thrilled to hear that.'

I shrug, watching as the red dot fizzes with streaks of orange and purple, like scratches on an old film reel. I choose my words carefully. 'I guess I'm just a little concerned that nobody's going to want to watch this? I mean all I'm seeing is a glorified lava lamp. Sure, maybe a couple of stoned computer science students might be interested, but it's hardly primetime, is it?'

'Do you have any idea how many lava lamps have been sold worldwide?' Paul says.

I roll my eyes.

'You're missing the point,' Katya continues. 'This is just the start. The system has to study you first. It has to learn to speak "David". But once it cracks your code? That's when things get interesting. Believe me.'

'Fine,' I say. 'I believe you.'

'He doesn't believe you,' says Paul.

I glance down at the dot, which is now pulsing a defiant shade of indigo.

'Okay, fine. I don't believe you.'

Katya smiles. 'I promise you we know what we're doing. She leans forwards, so close that her dark hair falls against my cheek. It smells good, like fresh linen, or faraway oceans. 'Now, what I want is for you to go home and rest. You've earned it. Take a few days to recharge your batteries before the tornado hits.'

As she speaks, I find myself staring at her neck, as smooth and pale as porcelain. Her hand reaches out, closing the distance between us, before settling gently on my thigh. For a second I stop breathing. The room disappears.

And then she straightens up.

'I've already spoken to Sarah,' she continues. 'She's on her way to collect you.'

'But what am I supposed to do?'

'Do? You don't need to do anything. Just be yourself. Hang out. Make videos. We'll contact you in the next few days to see how you're getting on.'

As she and Paul turn to leave, I catch a final glimpse of the tablet. The dot on the screen has changed again, this time hovering somewhere between yellow and green, a vaguely sickly hue, the colour of crème de menthe cocktails, or artificial lime.

'Hey,' I call as they reach the door. 'What does that colour mean?'

Katya frowns, tilting it towards Paul.

Without so much as a flare of his nostrils, he turns and fixes me with a cold stare. 'Desire.'

'Ha,' Katya says, a single, percussive note, less like a laugh than an accusation.

As the door gasps shut behind them, I feel my cheeks begin to burn.