CHAPTER 1

Thursday, 11th April 2019

If we could edit memories like videos, we'd smile more. Cut this out. Add that in. Change it so it never happened, never hurt.

I press play.

Two boys stand on a swing, shoes jostling for space on the wooden seat. They rock back and forth, clutching the ropes that hang from the branch of a cherry blossom tree. High-pitched laughter spills from their mouths.

Michael and me, eight-years-old, from a lifetime ago.

He's in his red school uniform, me in my navy. His mum, Mrs Emmeline, films us as we grin at the camera, determined to rock higher. Our overzealousness comes with a price. The swing lurches too far and we flail desperately. As the video tilts to frame blue sky, there's a yelp, then a soft thud. We'd taken turns earlier to jump off the swing, but this was a slip. I can't remember which of us is now sprawled on the grass.

'*Are you okay?*' asks Mrs Emmeline off-camera, voice tinted in amusement. Michael and I are too busy giggling to reply, and as her melodic laughter joins in, the video ends.

My thumb hovers over my phone, itching to replay the footage, immerse myself in that moment—carefree and careless. No guilt, no grief. Just two, childhood friends having fun together.

I should delete it. Michael will never hear her laugh again, so why should I get to?

Claws snag my socks as Panda prowls past. My laptop on the coffee table's now cat-free. Crossing my legs on the seat of the corner-sofa, I blow black fur off the keyboard and scroll through the captivating schedule of tomorrow's film symposium at King's College.

The bitter tang of Paracetamol lingers on my tongue, yet to subdue my headache, and the floor lamp bathes us in an amber glow. Panda pounces up beside me, staring out the windows as London's evening drizzle speckles the glass. When I moved into Shani's flat a year ago, it took Panda a month to warm to me.

'Think they'll make it back dry?' I ask Panda.

Koben needed a haircut and Shani wanted to watch the barber shave designs in his hair. They haven't taken umbrellas and it's twenty minutes from the salon back to Shani's place. I bet Koben will get spirals this time.

Panda wiggles her tail, hops onto the coffee table and promptly chews on the ticket Shani's dad, Mr Ravi, bought me for the event. Little rascal. I tug the ticket from her mouth and smooth the crinkles. Mr Ravi reckons King's College will invite me for an interview any day now. Three universities rejected my application for Film Studies so maybe I shouldn't get my hopes up, but attending the British Silent Film Festival symposium should improve my chances.

I only realised an hour ago that I left my data transfer cable back at home. If I delete enough memes and old videos from my phone, I can take pictures throughout tomorrow.

An email notification pings on my phone. My pulse skips—maybe it's good news from King's? No. I don't recognise the sender: *tenmoredays@gmail.com*.

19:36

Subject: Film suggestions

Hi Zach. This category of film was selected specially for you.

Did I choose correctly?

No name underneath, but there's a website linked below the message. Awesome. I'd subscribed to a film newsletter last month to receive personalised movie recommendations but hadn't expected an email so soon. I click the link and lean forward, ready to choose from a gallery of classic films. The webpage loads.

But not with iconic posters of alien and human fingers touching tentatively in E.T, the enormous shark rising to devour an oblivious swimmer in Jaws, or even the skeletal t-rex stamped against the red circle in Jurassic Park.

Heat flares across my cheeks. I'm starting at thumbnails of older women, brown-haired and beautiful like Mrs Emmeline. Probably mid-forties, too, all sultry eyes with barely anything on. The type of pictures shared furtively behind textbooks or crowded around in the changing room.

Most definitely it's a dodgy link. It's likely not a malware pop-up, but I'm frazzled enough to check the link on my laptop, which loads the same page.

The cosy glow from the floor lamp is now too intimate. Too suggestive, like the lamp in Michael's bedroom where Mrs Emmeline and I ended up alone together at her party two years ago. Alone together just hours before she died.

I squeeze my palms against the sides of my head, pulse throbbing in my ears. As my phone screen dims, the front door clicks open.

Shani and Koben's voices tumble in with the smell of damp clothes. Face still warm, I lower my hands, let out a sharp breath.

'Zacker!' Koben kicks off his shoes and bounds into the living room. 'Mate, my cut turned out *sick*.'

'I had no idea they could shave so precisely,' says Shani from the hallway, voice bubbly and chilled compared to last week. Don't know why she was nervous because even the postman knew she'd get her university offer.

Koben flops beside me onto the couch to show off the spirals on the side of his scalp. ‘See? Even better than last—’ When his eyes widen, I turn to see what’s caught his attention.

My laptop, still displaying pictures of those women.

I slam the lid shut, but the way my best friend’s stunned expression morphs to a slow smirk leaves my throat dry. When Shani finally steps into the living room, wiping raindrops off the lenses of her glasses, I close my mouth. No *way* am I trying to explain these pictures in front of her.

She perches her glasses back on her nose and hands me a paper bag, the spicy-sweet scent of carrot cake wafting out. ‘How’s the headache?’

The cake I’d asked her to get now smells like poison; Michael had loved calling my mum Mrs Carroway because it sounded like carrot cake. I grew up calling his mum Mrs Emmeline instead of Mrs Wilson because I loved how it rolled off my tongue.

I push the bag towards Koben instead, gesture for him to help himself. ‘Took some Paracetamol.’

Shani plucks at the hem of her sweater. Oh, come on. She worried enough about securing a coveted spot to study medicine, and I don’t want to be on the receiving end of fresh concern.

‘Following the dosage?’ she says.

I took three tablets instead of the advised two. ‘Yeah.’

Shani crouches to stroke Panda, who’s purring against her leg. ‘Okay. Good.’

Koben chews on a piece of cake and stretches out, his foot nudging my phone. He helped optimise it last month and knows the passcode, which I still haven’t changed. Crap. It has the same pictures he just saw on my laptop. If Koben sees those too, he’ll *really* think I was chatting up some older woman.

As my hand twitches, Koben's eyes zero in on the locked screen. 'Expecting a message?'

I pull my hand back. 'No.'

He licks frosting off his knuckles and leans back, lounging against the arm of the sofa. Tension eases from my shoulders. He's not interested. I let my guard down too early; Koben snatches my phone and dashes across to the kitchen.

'Wait!' My stupid socks slip against the floorboard as I scramble after him. We careen around the island counter and I grasp the back of his leather jacket. He yanks out of my grip, races back towards the sofa, vaults over the coffee table—

And slams straight into the floor lamp.

It topples, but I grab it before it smashes into the window. Shani peeks between her fingers at the averted catastrophe and Koben gleefully unlocks my passcode before I seize my phone.

As I rub away his sticky fingerprints, he nudges his chin toward my laptop. 'Did I ruin your little cam session?'

I avert my gaze, but a framed photo of a beaming little Shani with her parents at a cricket match leaves me emptier.

Shani swats Koben's arm and repositions the lamp. 'Zach, don't forget to set your alarm for the symposium.'

If I have to discuss films tomorrow the way I did with Mrs Emmeline, I'll never want anything to do with film again. I swallow the lump in my throat. 'Think I'll skip.'

Koben's smirk slides off his face.

'Is your headache that bad?' Shani frowns. 'You might feel better in the morning.'

'I'll pay your dad back.'

It's a weak attempt to get her off my case, and Shani sighs. 'This isn't about the money—'

'I know!'

She flinches.

'You were hyped over this for *ages*,' says Koben, forehead creasing as my breaths tremble. 'Shall I come with you tomorrow?'

'No need.' I turn away from my friends, gather my phone and laptop, stride up the staircase past Shani's room and stumble into mine. The guest room's usually comfy, but tonight, the slanted ceiling smothers me. I whacked my head on it this morning and Shani immediately assessed me before deciding I hadn't given myself a concussion.

By the window, two large hazel eyes gleam against the setting sun. They're the same colour as Mrs Emmeline's were, and my breath surges out of me. It's like she'd come up here, waiting for me.

Hand shaking, I point at the door. 'Leave me alone.'

Panda doesn't move.

Amused, mischievous, inquisitive…regretful. All those emotions I'd seen in Mrs Emmeline's eyes that night at her party two years ago is now a condemning stare. Does Michael still think it's my fault his mum died?

'Leave. Me. *Alone*.'

Panda streaks out of my room and into the corridor. My skin prickles, palms clammy. I slam the door shut, flop against the pillows.

Michael and I were meant to attend the same sixth form before she died. Now, that opportunity for Michael and me to build our friendship to something as close as what our parents had, has withered. I know he'd rather go the rest of his life wishing he could erase my existence from memory.

Can't blame him. Not when I was suspected for murdering his mum with an antidepressant overdose. Not when his dad died the same night.

I didn't see them die. Neither did Michael because he'd missed the party. When the chief detective, Rowan Seth, interrogated me afterwards, it went so hideously, my family fell apart. Though Seth only interrogated me once, I still remember his beer-stained breath as he leaned over the table at the end to say, *'You know what makes lies convincing? When it's mixed with the truth.'*

The truth behind every action, feeling, and intention throughout Emmeline Wilson's party two years ago.

I close my eyes, push away the burgeoning memory, but the details seeps in like I'm full of cracks. How could I have done something so terrible that a celebration at five-thirty in the evening ended up in devastation just eight hours later? Every conversation and expression floods my bones in a familiar sequence—like I'm an actor rehearsing a scene.

So I let it rewind.

CHAPTER 2

Friday, 21st April 2017

2 years ago

Soft jazz drifts over the fence of 17 Canary Street in Richmond when we arrive at 5:30 pm—half an hour late, courtesy of Dad misplacing the car keys. Dennis Wilson cheerfully hangs our coats in the cloakroom and leads us into the foyer, which is adorned with vivid paintings of dragonflies, hummingbirds and jellyfish. Even *more* impressive than what I'd seen from Michael over the last few months. He's taking this seriously now.

Mum stops at a cute painting of a polar bear with a cub. 'These are beautiful! Has he been taking art classes?'

‘He watches tutorials and artists online,’ says Mr Dennis, peering over his wire-rimmed glasses at the painting. ‘That one was for Mother’s Day. He was so embarrassed when Ems insisted on framing it.’

It’s a little ridiculous he can’t see how good he is. I’d be delighted if I managed anything of that calibre. Though I guess insecurity in our interests is a frustrating trait we both share.

Mum’s bright smile turns to me. ‘Darling, why don’t you paint something? We can hang it in our kitchen!’

‘What’s the poor kitchen done to deserve that?’ Just because I can use a pencil to storyboard and a camera to film, doesn’t mean I can use a paintbrush properly.

‘Penguins shouldn’t be too hard to draw.’ Her schoolkids drew Mother’s Day cards last week. I started buying cards after turning ten so maybe she’s missing the hand-crafted touch. Shouldn’t be a loss, given my art skills, but she clasps her fingers together, staring at me with hopeful eyes. ‘I’ll let you pick Monday’s movie?’

I can’t help but laugh at her attempt at a bribe. It’s her turn to pick the film for Monday Movie Night; between us, we’ve unearthed an eclectic range from indie to blockbuster, foreign to formulaic, and I still prefer her choices.

A banner saying *Smiling is Surviving - 10th Anniversary* stretches over the open patio doors, and conversation sweeps through the twenty-or-so guests in black tie and dresses who have spilled into the back garden. They lounge on rattan chairs, cluster under the wooden gazebo, and perch on the blanket-covered stone wall by the bird bath, nursing flutes of champagne.

Mum’s already complimenting the tulips and daffodils. Flames dance in the firepit, tempering the chill, and even moths flutter around fairy lights to top off that fairy-tale feel.

Ducking out under the banner, Mr Dennis turns to the cherry blossom tree in the corner, which has carpeted the patio in pink petals. Mrs Emmeline’s standing under the tree with another guest. ‘Ems! Look who finally turned up.’

Mrs Emmeline excuses herself and jogs over to fling her arms around Mum. ‘I’ve been waiting to give my speech.’

Squeezing back, Mum turns to frown at Dad, who shuffles guiltily, before she says, ‘Someone left the car keys on the microwave.’

‘Honestly, David.’ Mrs Emmeline smacks his chest but melts into a smile as he hugs her.

‘So proud of you, Emmy,’ he says.

‘Ten *years*,’ says Mum. ‘What a way you’ve come, Em. And a beautiful dress to celebrate the occasion!’

Mrs Emmeline’s green dress has a lustrous sheen right down to her ankles. ‘Oh, this? Special little gift,’ she says, prompting a laugh from Mum. ‘And look at you, Zach!’

When Mrs Emmeline hugs me, I get a face-full of long, wavy brown hair and strawberry scented shampoo. ‘Bet the world feels bigger now, hm?’

It’s only been six days since I turned sixteen. Now, I can apply for my own passport, change my name, open a savings account, work full-time...have sex.

‘Yeah, it does. Congratulations, Mrs Emmeline. And thanks again for the present.’

‘My pleasure, honey. Still can’t believe how tall you’ve got!’ With a hand pressed by the tiny starfish pendant below her neck, she looks me up and down. ‘Picture of David back in college, Charly.’

Suppose I’ve got the same sharp jawline and—according to Mum—*hooded eyes*. Whatever that means. I’m still half a foot shorter and years from growing facial hair I can shave into stubble. And I haven’t, of course, built up a repertoire of dad jokes. Got the freckles from Mum though, who’s covered hers tonight under make-up.

‘He’s got Di Caprio’s Romeo look going on,’ says Mrs Emmeline as Mr Dennis fetches glasses from the dining table that’s set out in the garden. ‘Works well with dark hair, doesn’t it?’ I’d let Mum comb gel through my hair because some classmates rocked up to school with gel before Easter break, and it didn’t look bad. Plucking an open bottle of champagne off the table, Mrs Emmeline fills the glasses and passes them around.

When she tilts the bottle over the last glass for me, I say, ‘I’m happy to pass.’ I tried some champagne once from Mum’s glass. Way too sour.

‘Shall I fix you a cocktail?’ offers Mrs Emmeline. ‘A daiquiri? Margarita? Passionfruit martini?’ I’m not even sure what they taste like, except maybe the martini. ‘Perhaps a soda?’ she adds, but there’s now an inch of champagne in the glass and I don’t want to inconvenience her.

‘Nah, champagne’s fine. Haven’t had the pink type before.’

Mr Dennis raises his glass. ‘Go on, it won’t poison you.’ The fizzing champagne is the same shade as the birthmark splashed over his nose and mouth, which clashes with his ginger hair. ‘It’s a Rosé, very different from the white.’

So I accept the glass and resign myself to finishing it by the end of the night.

—not the end of chapter 2 (to be continued!)