

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 as 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.

But the swing lurches too far. Our arms flail for balance and the camera drops, tilting to frame blue sky. There's a yelp, then a soft thud; one of us is now sprawled on the grass but I can't remember who.

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

My thumb hovers over my phone, itching to replay the footage.

I should delete it.

Claws snag my socks as Panda prowls past my toes; on the coffee table, my laptop's now cat-free. I brush black fur off the keyboard and scroll through the schedule of tomorrow's film symposium at King's College.

Panda was nervous around me when I first moved into Shani's flat but, after living here for a year, the cat's warmed to me. When I hike my legs up and cross them on the seat of the L-sofa, Panda pounces up beside me, staring out the windows as London's evening drizzle speckles the glass. The bitter tang of Paracetamol lingers on my tongue, and the floor lamp bathes us in an amber glow.

'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.

Panda hops onto the coffee table and chews on the ticket that 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 symposium should improve my chances. If I delete enough memes and old videos from my phone, I can take pictures throughout tomorrow.

An email notification pops up on my phone. Maybe good news from King's? I don't recognise the sender.

19:36 (0 mins ago)

Sender: <tenmoredays@gmail.com>

To: me

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 get 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.

It loads with thumbnails of older women.

All scantily clad and sultry-eyed.

Heat flares across my cheeks. It can't be a malware pop-up; most definitely it's a dodgy link, but I'm frazzled enough to open 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.

Swivelling the laptop aside, I squeeze my palms against the sides of my head. My pulse throbs in my ears. As my phone screen dims to a glossy mirror, 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 and let out a sharp breath.

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

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

Koben chucks a paper bag onto the coffee table, flops beside me onto the couch, and tilts his head 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 peers at my face. 'How's the headache?'

I drag a palm over my eyes as Koben fishes out a slice of carrot cake from the bag. 'Took more Paracetamol.'

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 the syllables rolled off my tongue.

Shani plucks at the hem of her sweater. 'Following the dosage?'

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. 'Yeah.'

'Okay. Good.' Her fingers relax and she crouches to stroke Panda, who's purring against her leg.

Koben lounges against the arm of the sofa, his knee nudging my phone. The screen's locked, but he helped optimise my phone last month and knows the password for the passcode grid 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 movement. 'Expecting a message?'

I pull my hand back. 'No.'

Licking frosting off his knuckles, he interlocks his fingers and stretches his arms above his head. Tension eases from my shoulders; he's not interested.

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 pulls 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 pattern passcode with a backwards Z 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 to the wall, but the framed photo of a five-year-old Shani with her parents at a cricket match, holding up a Sri Lankan flag, leaves me emptier.

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

I swallow the lump in my throat. 'Not feeling well. Think I'll skip.'

Koben's smirk slides off his face. 'You wouldn't stop going on about it yesterday.'

'Is it your headache?' Shani frowns. 'But the symposium's supposed to—'

‘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 and my breathing trembles through the room. Gathering my phone and laptop, I stride up the staircase past Shani’s room and into the guest room. It’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.

On my bed, two large hazel eyes loom in the dark. They’re the same colour as Mrs Emmeline’s were.

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 is now a condemning stare.

‘Leave. Me. *Alone.*’

Panda streaks out of my room and into the corridor. My skin prickles, palms clammy. Slamming the door shut, I stumble to the bed and flop against the pillows. This room isn’t mine. House isn’t mine. Family photos on the wall aren’t mine. Footsteps, then a knock. Shani, obviously; Koben would barge in.

‘Are you okay?’ says Shani. Muffled behind the door, she almost sounds like Mrs Emmeline. Michael and I were meant to attend the same sixth form before she died. When I don’t reply, Shani says, ‘I’ll make sure Panda doesn’t disturb you.’ Her footsteps retreat down the staircase.

When Emmeline and Dennis Wilson died two years ago, the chief detective, Rowan Seth, interrogated me in one of the worst experiences of my life. I still remember Seth’s beer-stained breath as he leaned over the table to say, ‘*You know what makes lies convincing? When it’s mixed with the truth.*’

The truth behind every action, feeling, and intention. I close my eyes, push away the memory, but it seeps in like I'm full of cracks. Every conversation and expression flood my bones in a familiar sequence—like I'm an actor rehearsing a scene.

I let it rewind.