

CHAPTER 1

Dean radiated misery. He was Martin's best mate, and now they were making their way to the Great Communal Hall to watch his death. Lily felt sorry for Dean; he had tried so desperately to help Martin. But Martin had been hell-bent on breaking the rules, and now he was going to pay with his life.

Lily locked the solid metal door behind them. Dean smirked. "I really don't know why you do that, what do you think is going to happen if you don't lock it? You know the security in this place is mad, whatever it is you think is gonna happen, just isn't!"

She smiled patiently at him, today was going to be tough and she wanted to be kind to him, but really she felt like saying, 'Yeah, but I bet you never thought we'd be going to see your friend get terminated, but that's about to happen.'

The walk to the Great Hall was short, about ten minutes from door to door, but the feeling of dread and the silence between them seemed to make it drag on longer. When finally they arrived Lily took Dean's shaking hand and found them some quiet seats as far towards the back of the hall as she dared to go.

Promptly, and all too soon, the hall lights went off and the stage lights came on. It had begun. The Chief Law Enforcer appeared on stage to reluctant but duty-bound applause. He was dressed head to toe in the entirely black uniform, and he bore his usual disturbing expression of mild amusement. He raised his hand for silence, and began the short, scripted speech.

"We are all here to bear witness to the punishment of Martin 2017. 2017 has repeatedly broken our rules, and of paramount

significance he has refused to wear his sleep-mask. For these sins he will now be terminated and his existence will cease.”

Dean drew a sharp breath. The Chief Law Enforcer looked to the left and two burly Enforcers dragged Martin onstage. Martin looked like a wild animal, desperate and gagged with his eyes rolling in his head. Lily wanted so much to look away, but didn't dare. Without hesitation or emotion, the Chief Enforcer said, “2017, goodbye,” and pressed something on what looked quite simply like a remote control aimed directly at Martin's torso. Martin's eyes went jet black, his jaw fell open, and he slumped lifeless to the floor.



Walking home - if that was what you could call the stainless steel haven to sterility, god how she longed for one of the proper houses the retired ones got outside the City - Lily felt light-headed and dizzy. Even having seen it for herself, she couldn't believe Martin had gone that way. He was really the only person they knew closely to have been terminated, and somehow it seemed unreal, as though Martin would any moment pull up in his mirror-shiny car and flash his carefree smile. But that wasn't ever going to happen, ever again.

Dean tightened his grip on her hand, and tried to smile. “Let's go to our lake,” he breathed. She blinked through her tears. It wasn't really their lake, they just called it that because it was where they had met. It was actually one of the reservoirs that supplied the City, but with its swathes of water lilies, quacking ducks, and tall swaying trees, it was idyllic. They had sat all evening watching the sun melt away, talking and laughing in the first blush of love. That too had been a termination day, and she often wondered whether she and Dean would have been matched, had they not just found each other that day.

It was about half an hour's walk, Lily's feet automatically taking her down the right roads without her really thinking

about it. They didn't really talk. What was there to say? When they passed someone, they didn't offer the usual 'hi' or a smile, and the passing blank faces reflected their own. Termination days did that to you; you went into yourself and tried to hide from the world, a world that was sometimes good, but sometimes so very terrifying.

The lake was full to bursting. It had been a long wet winter. Every now and then the sun came out, making the water sparkle. Lily imagined herself diving in and swimming far away, but of course she couldn't and there was nowhere to go. They sat down in the meadow grass, where the three of them had often sat with a picnic and a glass of wine. It had often been the three of them. Martin had never really held down a proper relationship, and he had never been officially matched with anyone, probably because they knew he was too much of a handful.

The more Lily thought about it, the more she was surprised that Martin had even reached the age of twenty-seven. She had known Martin for about ten years, he sort of came as part of the package when she started dating Dean. At first they hadn't really liked each other, she thought Martin resented Dean for having found a girlfriend, and Martin thought Lily was stealing his best mate away from him. But slowly they had somehow learnt to share Dean.

The more she'd gotten to know Martin, the more she knew he'd get into trouble one day. He just didn't care about the rules. He did the minimum to get by, but always had an underhand comment and a free-spirited light in his eyes. It was hard to pinpoint, but there was just something about Martin that made him different, made him more innocent, more *naive* than anyone else she knew. Lily would never understand why he had refused to wear his sleep-mask though, the sleep-masks were for everyone's wellbeing. They basically purified your mind whilst you slept, ensuring a society free from criminal and evil intent. Why on earth would Martin refuse to wear his? It didn't

make any sense.

Then Lily felt Dean's arms around her, and she was taken from the comfort of her memories into the harsh reality of the moment. He held her like that for ages, and all the time her mind raced with thoughts of a man now forever gone.

CHAPTER 2

Luke felt the twitchiness of impatience as he waited for the girl to print his ticket. Then he noticed her long dark hair and big brown eyes and envisioned what a good Character she would make in *GameWorld*, certainly eye candy for the male gamers, anyway.

“Sir, your ticket,” she giggled, and he suddenly became aware he had been staring. Luke smiled, took the ticket and hurried to his platform, glad to find the Skyroute there and ready to take passengers. That meant being home on time tonight and the potential to watch at least three hours of *GameWorld*.

Luke was glad to be going home. He’d had a harsh day at work defending a murderer, a raping, bludgeoning murderer at that, and the immorality of it all was starting to get to him. Luke’s job meant defending his client, but sometimes he just knew they were guilty. The thought of *GameWorld* was like a drug and the promise of blissful escapism into it began to relax him. Luke spent his journey home planning some future events for his Character.

As he walked the last few steps to his ultra-lux apartment, Luke couldn’t wait to start submitting ideas for his Character into the network. Inside, he threw off his coat and quickly made a sandwich. Sitting down in front of his top-spec computer, and logging into it, he thought about how miserable his life had become since losing Georgia. Instead of having a girlfriend’s name or a beloved pet’s as his password, he actually had the name of a Character in *GameWorld* - Lily. Pathetic. But this lonely realisation only made him even more bitter, and coupled

with the naff day he'd just had, he was freakishly excited by what he was about to do.

Luke had always treated his Character with care, as though real. As though, in fact, his Character was somehow an extension of himself and he could live the perfect life he so desperately wanted through Dean and the things he did. Luke had bought him as soon as the Game came out, there was so much hype and he found he just had to have a Character of his own. It had cost a hell of a load of cash, but Luke had figured he could have passed it on to his kid by now, make it a sort of family heirloom. But Luke had lost the girlfriend and the chance of the kids. It didn't matter now because he doubted he'd be able to pass Dean on anyway. In a way, Dean wasn't just a guy on his Wallvision, he was kind of a best mate, and Luke had always treated him as such. Now all that was about to change.

Luke hesitated slightly over the writing pad, but the voice inside his head reminded him that *GameWorld* wasn't real life anyway, and that anything he made his Character do was inconsequential. He shrugged his shoulders and began typing into the Network that he wanted his Character, Dean, to have an affair with Zoe, a pretty girl Luke had spotted when flicking through *GameWorld* the night before. When it was done, Luke curled up on the sofa and closed his eyes, suffering a turmoil of different emotions and struggling to deal with them.

He suddenly felt so ashamed of what he had just done and pictured poor Lily, the beauty who had captivated and thrilled him when she and Dean had met by the lake. Luke had been happy to let their lives together unfold naturally, never instructing Dean when it came to these things, and now he had destroyed that unique part of *GameWorld*. Yet at the same time he felt excited and somehow justified, as though the never-ending anguish of having Georgia leave him was now going to be shared out a bit.

Luke turned on his Wallvision, and saw Dean and Lily hugging. He was jealous, he had to face it, deep down he had always been

jealous of what these two shared, so real and endearing. *So bloody sickening*, said the voice in his head. It was infuriating, his fascination with their lives had driven away the one good thing he'd had in his own life. He remembered Georgia had threatened time and again to leave unless the obsession with *GameWorld* ended. But Luke couldn't do it, and had convinced himself that she wouldn't really go. They were empty threats. Then once too often, he missed dinner with her, or went to bed hours after she had, unable to drag himself away from watching Dean and Lily, until one day he'd come home to an empty apartment. Georgia's things were gone, she hadn't even left a note, and he hadn't heard from her since. No more waking up beside her, watching her slowly come round to the world. No more touching her silky skin. No more anything Georgia.

That was almost a year ago, and the pain lingered still. In some stupid and self-denying way, Luke held Dean and Lily partly responsible, so now felt he was getting his revenge on them, childish and cruel as he knew it was. When Luke went to sleep that night, he knew that Dean would be receiving the instructions he had entered earlier and, when the new day came, the heartbreak would be set in motion.

CHAPTER 3

The spring sunlight streamed through the window, waking Lily up with a smile. She loved being enveloped in sunshine, and was so glad the winter was now becoming a cold memory shadowed by the promise of summer. Lily knew it annoyed Dean, though he would never say it, when she jumped out of bed on mornings like this, but she couldn't help it. And at least the sunshine would help her exorcise the horrific memories of yesterday.

“Wake up, Deano, it's sunny!” Lily giggled, wriggling under the duvet at his feet and climbing up his lovely warm body. But he pushed her off hard with a grumble, making her gasp. “Hey!” she managed through the surprise, “what the hell are you playing at?”

Dean turned silently towards her and glared, before turning back around and pulling the duvet over his head.

Lily drew another rasping breath, because in his eyes in that moment she saw something that she recognised, and it horrified her throughout. When she was a little girl of just five, Lily had woken up one morning with a feeling of deep dread. She had tried to literally gulp the feeling back down into her stomach all morning, her mum telling her it was probably something funny she had eaten the night before. That afternoon she had been playing out in the garden, running round with her crazy beloved boxer dog, when a butterfly had fluttered past, and without a second thought she had grabbed it from the air and slowly, sickeningly ripped its wings to shreds. Her mum had found her sitting screaming amid the poor shredded creature. It made Lily shudder just to remember how horrible she had

felt doing it, but just how unable she was to stop herself. It was as if she were no longer in control of her own body, as though someone else had taken over, yet she was still there and devastatingly aware of her actions.

Her mum had explained it all to her, later, when she was old enough to understand. She'd said that the powers that be were mostly kind to them, but every now and then an evil little demon would come along and make things bad. Lily had suffered such demons firsthand that day in the garden although, mercifully, after that nothing bad had ever really happened to her again. But seeing that look in Dean's eyes, she was that five-year-old girl again, feeling sick to the stomach with a deep dread.

CHAPTER 4

Zoe was tired of the late shift. The bar where she worked was always full of the same old people - the nauseating arrogant businessmen who, failing so badly in their love lives, had nothing to go home to but a microwave meal and a cold unmade bed. Then there were the desperate young girls in outfits that barely maintained their modesty in the hope that it might somehow make them look old enough to be there. The day shift was much quieter, a couple of families taking the kids out for lunch perhaps and, even if it did tend to drag on a bit, at least Zoe didn't feel as though she was being mentally undressed in the men's shameless stares.

Ten to eleven, only another hour or so and she would be out of this dive and in bed with her wonderful man, Devin. OK, so he wasn't perfect and he found it 'hard to talk about his feelings.' In fact, in the twelve months they had been together he'd seemed to find it hard to talk about anything at all, so they spent most of their quality time together beneath the duvet. But he was a warm body to cuddle her in the middle of the night, and at the moment that was good enough.

Zoe felt a different kind of stare upon her and, as she looked up, she felt herself swoon under his gaze. The man she was looking at was divinely beautiful, about six feet tall, with dark glossy hair falling into his gorgeous green eyes, the stuff of dreams. *Sod Devin*, she smiled to herself. Staring at him, she noticed a slightly troubled look about him, a shadow of something bad, like a curled yellowing edge on an otherwise perfect flower. She smiled again as she thought of her mum warning her about men like this, too gorgeous for their own good, downright knowing

it and arrogant as hell. She could handle it though, Zoe always gave as good as she got. In fact she kind of liked men with a bit of attitude, she thought it made them edgy and sexy.

“Hi,” he said, “a beer please” - a forced smile - “and whatever you’re having.”

She smiled, turning her back to reach for a glass, taking time to move slowly and ensure he got a good look at her slim but perfect figure. As she turned and poured the beer, she got some on her fingers and brazenly licked it off, staring him in the eyes the whole time. He looked uncomfortable, almost like he was fighting some impulse, yet he never once broke her gaze. A little perplexed by him, but spurred on by his eye contact, Zoe asked him his name.

“Dean,” he replied.

“Well hi, Dean, I’m Zoe,” she purred. *To hell with it*, she thought, as she dared to put her hand out to him as she said it.

Dean took her hand in his and bent to kiss it. It was a soft, gentle kiss, but she noticed that his hand was shaking.

“So, I’ve never seen you around here before,” Zoe said, then cringed as she realised she had just come out with one of the worst cliché chat-up lines around.

“Well, I’ve only been in here once,” he replied, and felt nauseous with guilt as he recalled the time he and Lily had come in for a drink together, in the early giddy days of their relationship. He smiled as he remembered the way they had left the bar, giggling and unwilling to break contact with some part of the other’s body.

Zoe noticed him visibly relax. “Shame,” she said, lowering her voice and looking at him from beneath her made-up eyelashes. “I don’t think I was here then, I would have remembered you, for sure.”

Dean drew breath, taken aback by her shameless flirting. He didn’t come across women like this in his normal, everyday life. Lily was so gentle and in many ways quite shy, she would never flirt so outrageously.

“So what do you do, Dean?” she asked, drawing his name out breathily.

“Oh, I’m a mechanic, in a garage uptown,” he offered. “What about you?” He felt like a right fool even before he’d finished his sentence.

“Oh, I’m a lawyer, I just do the bar work for the money,” she laughed and raised her eyebrows.

“Crap, I wasn’t thinking!” said Dean, “I meant to say, erm, do you enjoy working in a bar?”

“Not ‘till today,” she replied, quite honestly.



The sound of the door being gently opened woke Lily from her light doze. She wasn’t sleeping properly anyway, she never did without Dean in the bed beside her. She looked at the clock, nearly midnight. *Where had he been till now?* When he went out with the guys from work he was normally, if not always, home by half ten, maybe eleven at the very latest. But never midnight, not on a weeknight. Still, she couldn’t begrudge him a night with the boys, it was probably his way of mourning. Dean crept almost silently into the room.

“It’s alright, I’m awake anyway,” she whispered. “Why are you so late?”

As he climbed into bed, he slid his cold hands across her stomach, it was something he loved to do, and something she hated him doing.

“Get off!” she yelled, “you know I can’t stand it!” He moved his hand slowly further down her stomach, “Hey! Why are you so late?” she pressed.

“Babe, I was out with the lads, you know that, we just got a bit carried away tonight.”

“Go to sleep, and don’t face me, you smell horrible,” she said. She hated that beer and sweat smell when he’d been in the pub. At least now that he was in she could go to sleep properly.

She reached down beside the bed and put her sleep-mask on. The morning's dread was melting away. Tomorrow was a new day. Now that he was home safe, sleep was hers within seconds.