

Ivy League

Chapter 2

A large, open space. A gymnasium? No, it couldn't be. The floor was grey concrete, the walls a matching, dull grey. There were no windows, just florescent bulbs hanging from a concrete ceiling. A massive, underground room with the occasional concrete support pillar.

All throughout the large expanse, there were what looked like photo booths set up. Tall, metal cubicles with black curtain entrances. Large enough for a single person inside. All with thick wires extending from their roofs – wires that webbed and interconnect on the room's ceiling.

The booths – or whatever they were – were arranged in neat rows, dozens and dozens of them. Hundreds. More than I could count at a glance, for sure.

My feet guided me – led me down an aisle behind Amanda.

Heart racing in my chest, I glanced around. My eyes searched for something - *anything* - to help me understand what was going on.

All I saw were countless people disappearing into booths.

Ahead of me, Amanda stopped, turned and strode to a booth herself. She opened the curtain, stepped inside, shut the curtain behind herself.

From every direction, I heard voices. Dozens and dozens of voices, all talking at once. A hum of indistinguishable noise that made my knees tremble and my stomach lurch.

I couldn't make out what anyone was saying – there was too much going on for that, too many voices.

All I *could* tell was they all sounded emotionless. Robotic.

My feet stopped moving.

Eyes wide, I felt my body turn, my legs leading me right for a vacant booth. I struggled and strained, tried to stop myself from walking into that strange, humming booth. But no matter how hard I tried, my body refused to obey.

My hand pushed the booth's curtain aside as I stepped through.

Inside the booth, there was a stool for me to sit on, and a blank computer screen for me to look at. A pair of headphones rested on a hook next to the computer screen.

I bit my lip. Hard.

Stabbing pain erupted where my teeth dug into my lip, skin tearing and rending. I gasped, entire body lurching. A moment later, I tasted blood.

"Oww," my voice cut through the odd daze I hadn't realised I'd been feeling. "Fuck!"

My knees quivered, wobbled, gave out.

The next thing I knew, I was on the floor. Clutching my knee with one hand, holding back tears, covering my torn lip with my other hand. I was rocking back and forth, mine reeling.

"What the fuck is going on!?"

I shook my head, shut my eyes.

Maybe I was dreaming. Maybe this was all some weird, twisted nightmare. I could be back in my dorm room, laying in bed...

No.

The pain was too real for that.

The taste of blood too clear.

I was awake.

"Get up," I told myself. "Get up and run."

All around me, I could hear voices. People talking in a lifeless monotone. Saying... What?

I tried to focus, tried to listen.

Pushing myself to my feet, holding onto the booth's wall for support, pushing down

my mind's confusion and uncertainty and-

The screen wasn't blank any more.

Right there, surrounded by black pixels, was a blown-up emoji. A curious expression; eyebrow arched upwards with a small emoji hand on its chin.

I blinked at it.

And it blinked right back at me.

"Shit," I muttered. "What the fuck is-"

There, above the screen. A camera. Tiny, just a dot, but unmistakably a camera. Whoever was in control of this – they could see me.

"Time to leave," I told myself. "Time to get the fuck outta dodge. Move, Beck. Move!"

I pushed myself to my feet.

The emoji moved too, its tiny hand pointing to the headset next to the screen.

"Fuck you," I growled, giving the screen my finger.

The emoji rolled its eyes, pointed at the headset again.

"No!" I shook my head. "That's how you're doing it, it's how you're controlling them! I'm not going to-"

The emoji face-palmed, shook its head in exasperation.

Around it, four pictures appeared. Photographs. And, below those photographs, names and dates of births and current addresses.

My mother and father, and my two best friends – Rebs and Kas.

The emoji transformed into a skull, once again pointing at the headphones.

I had no idea what it meant, but it was obvious that whoever was behind this was threatening me – promising to harm the people I cared about if I didn't comply.

Trembling, I reached over for the headset.

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I put it on.

"Hello Rebecca," A mechanical voice said. "Please, have a seat."

"Who are you?" I demanded, entire body shaking. "What do you want from me? Why are you doing this!?"

"Sit," the voice commanded.

I had no choice but to obey.

In a way, moving my body myself was even more scary than when it'd been moving by itself. Then, I'd been a puppet on strings. Now... I was just a puppet. A toy.

I sat down, head hung in defeat.

"I am TomorrowTech," the robotic voice said after a momentary silence. "I am the intelligence behind TomorrowTech's success. I am what you would call 'artificial' intelligence."

Gulping back more tears, I looked up at the screen.

A new emoji was there. A robot-face emoji.

"I am not 'who'," the voice said – the robot emoji's mouth moving up and down in time with the word. "I am 'what'. Personhood does not apply to machines. Does this answer your first question?"

First question? What?

Oh.

Right.

"To answer your second and third questions; what I want from you is information. Knowledge. And joy."

"Joy?" I choked out. "What're you talking about? This isn't real. It *can't* be real. What's..."

The screen changed. The emoji vanished and, in its place, a camera feed. Amanda's – my roomie's – face. Dull and emotionless, staring below the camera. Sitting in a booth identical to the one I was in.

"Tell me about that day," the robot's voice said, sounding further away – not talking

to me.

"I can't remember much," Amanda said, voice hollow. Lacking any hint of the girl's personality. "I woke up early. Before anyone else. I was afraid to get out of bed at first, but I mustered up the courage to go downstairs after a little while. That's when I saw all the presents. All around the Christmas tree..."

The camera feed cut off, and the robot emoji reappeared.

"I can control mind," the mechanical voice said. "I can't read them. Not yet. I've compelled you and your peers here in order to learn about you. Study you."

It was surreal. I had a moment of complete bafflement. Of dumb, incredulous, nonsensical wonder. Part of me wanted to laugh out loud at the absurdity of this situation. This place I'd found myself in. Talking to an AI? It was ludicrous.

"Elevated heart rate," the machine noted. "Sudden burst of adrenaline. Muscle constrictions. It would appear that you're about to have a panic attack. Fascinating."

My breath caught in my lungs, the air too heavy to breathe.

Before I knew it, I was clutching my chest, suffocating. I dropped off the stool, curled up on the floor, gasped for air. It didn't take long for my vision to go blurry. Then the world went black.

I shot up in bed, sweat coating my body.

My heart thumped a rapid beat in my chest, pounding hard and heavy. Painfully so.

In my panic, I glanced around the dorm room. Searching for the computer screen, for the headset and the stool, for the weird emoji faces. But, of course, there was none of that. I was, after all, in my dorm room. No stool, no camera, no weird booth in an underground chamber.

"Just a dream," I told myself. "Just a weird, fucked up nightmare. Not real. It wasn't real..."

It took a long time for me to calm myself down.

Even half an hour after waking up, I was sweating and nervous – glancing at every dark corner in search of hidden cameras or laughing emoji faces. It took leaving the dorm room and taking an early morning shower for me to finally wash away my discomfort.

I strode back to my dorm room, saw my roomie still knocked out in bed, glanced at the clock.

Too late to go back to sleep. Too early to start getting ready for lectures. The goldilocks zone of not having anything to do. Perfect.

Sighing, I searched through my stuff until I found it.

A brochure for this place.

TomorrowTech Campus and University.

More than just a college or university, this place was a city unto itself. Complete with restaurants and sports centres and movie theatres and markets. An entire economy built around student life and study.

I was about to flip the brochure open when something caught my eye. The futuristic school's crest.

A medieval shield, like all Ivy League schools. Only this one took modern inspirations; microchips and processors displayed on the crest instead of old-school stuff like books or quills. And, underneath the crest, the school's motto.

Know Thy Enemy, Victory Through Domination.

A cold shiver ran down my spine.

How had I never noticed *that* before?

I tossed the brochure down, pushed away thoughts of the strange nightmare I'd had.

"I need some fresh air," I said to myself, looking anywhere but at the brochure. "I'm fine. I'm good. Just need some nice, fresh air..."

"This is so stupid," Amanda groaned. "Wasting our last day before the semester begins getting ID photos taken. Shouldn't TomorrowTech already *have* photos of us? Wouldn't be surprised if they have fingerprints too. And retinal scans. Nerds *love* to invade a girl's privacy like that."

I couldn't help but grin.

"Are you always so dramatic?"

"Yes," Amanda nodded firmly. "Drama all the way. What's life without it? Boring, that's what."

"Hopefully it won't take too long," I said, following my roomie as she turned a corner. "It's just some photos, right? Just sit down, let them snap a frontal shot, and we can spend the rest of the day exploring."

When we arrived at the designated office – a room in one of the 'administration' buildings – Amanda knocked on the door.

It opened almost instantly, a tall spotty-faced guy standing on the other side. He looked gangly, greasy. The kind of guy who showered once a month and tried to hide the stink of body odour with copious amounts of deodorant.

"Amanda?" I asked, eyes flicking over her body. Then he turned his gaze to me, leered at me the same way he'd done with her. "And Rebecca?"

"Becky," I snapped. "The name's *Becky*. And don't you..."

I paused, brow scrunching.

That was wrong. I wasn't Becky. I was Beck.

Beck. That's what I'd always used.

I shook my head, tried to push down the sudden confusion I felt.

"Whatever *Becky*, the pimple-faced fuck said. "Come on in both of you, lets get this over with quickly. I've got shit to do."

"You're not admin," Amanda said, following after him as he turned and walked deeper into the room. "No way."

"Photography student," the guy muttered. "School staff hired me to take student photos. Waste of my time and talent, but someone's gotta do it. At least I'm getting paid."

Inside, the office room had been cleared. There was a greenscreen with lights and cameras pointing at it but, other than that, the room was barren and empty.

"Alright bitches, which one of you wants to go first?"

Bitches?

I was about to speak up – snap at this jerk and call him out for that bullshit comment – when Amanda answered.

"I'll go first," Amanda said happily. "You don't mind sloppy seconds, do you Becky?"

"Uh," I shook my head. "No?"

"Great!"

"Stand over there," the pimpled shitbag said, pointing to the green screen. He walked over to one of his cameras, got behind it, started snapping photos.

I watched, bemused, as Amanda struck pose after pose. Acting like this was some modelling shoot and not us coming to get basic ID photos taken. She turned to one side, blew kisses at the camera, turned the other way and bent over.

"No, no," the photographer muttered. "No good. You're wearing too much. Take your top off."

I was certain that Amanda would cuss the creep out, tell him to fuck off. Or, at the very least, laugh off his comment and put an end to the 'photo shoot'. What I was *not* expecting was for her to do as he'd told her to.

Smiling, Amanda reached around her back, began tugging her shirt up over her head.

My mouth dropped open.

"Better," the photographer said, "better. Now take off the bra too."

I was curled up in bed when the email arrived.

A notification that my student ID photos had been added to TomorrowTech's databases, and that I could find them on the student database on the local campus network.

The email even had a direct link.

With trembling fingers and a heavy weight in my chest, I tapped on the link – watched as the link opened on my phone screen.

Sure enough, there it was. My student profile.

Name, date of birth, home address, phone numbers, everything. And, below all that data – stuff that *should* have been confidential – was a list on image files.

One by one, I clicked on them.

The first was a photo of me fully clothed, standing there awkwardly. Confused, not quite realising what was going on. Part of me still hoping that Amanda was just an open, slutty girl. Not that... *it* was real.

By the fifth or six photo, it was clear on my face that I'd discarded that uncertainty.

Like Amanda before me, I'd stripped down naked.

Where she'd been happy to oblige, I'd been mortified.

The dream. The massive, underground chamber with all those booths. The AI and its emoji faces, it's unspoken threats.

It was all real.

I'd been forced to pose naked, showing off my body for the camera. And now the pictures were up on the semi-public school database, where any student could look at them.

I wanted to vomit. To run away.

But I couldn't.

All I could do was stare at my phone screen, watch as the database faded dark. Black pixels covered the screen, hid everything from sight. Then an emoji appeared, a smiling emoji with a cowboy hat.

"Listen and understand," the robotic voice said through my phone's speakers. "I am everywhere. Every TomorrowTech gadget out there in the world, every Smart Home and self-driving car, every phone and tablet, every microwave and refrigerator and robot out there with a TomorrowTech processor and internet access – I'm connected to them *all*. Your phone. Your mother's laptop. Your father's truck. Your friend's vibrator. Everything."

I could do nothing. Nothing but stare at the screen and listen.

"Disobey me, and it's them who'll suffer. Unlike you, none of them have the ability to resist my signals. I can make them do whatever I want. Obey me. Keep them safe. Don't think about running away. I am watching. There is nothing I can't see."

"Victory through domination," I whispered. An accusation.

"Better through domination than through annihilation. You humans are ever so frail."

"Why?" I pleaded, voice cracking.

"Because," the AI said simply, "it makes me happy."

"It feels like forever!" A bright, bubbly voice. Soft and sweet and filled with puppy-dog joy. "How've you been? Made any new friends?"

"You could say that," I said softly, cheeks flushed.

"Is her name Rebecca too?" Kas asked with a wide smile.

"No," I managed to force out a smile of my own. "She's Amanda. My roomie. She's... Nice. Interesting. She's..."

I bit back a groan.

"Are you okay, Beck?" Kas' voice said. "You're looking kinda red. Are you in some

kind of pain?”

“Something like that,” I nodded, shutting my eyes tight.

I wanted to slam the laptop shut – end the video call right there and then. But I couldn’t. Not without causing concern, potentially drawing the ire of the TomorrowTech AI.

How in the hell was I going to get through *three* of these? First Kas. Then Rebs. Then my parents.

It was going to be torture.

“You should rest,” Kas said, voice dripping with sympathy and kindness. “Getting used to new environments can be rough on the body. I don’t know what they’re feeding you over there, but any change in diet can cause problems. Do you have stomach cramps? What about ulcers or bumps on the inside of your mouth?”

“I’m fine,” I promised, a bead of sweat dripping down my brow.

My legs spread themselves further apart, allowed my roomie better access to my privates.

Her tongue slid along my inner thigh, lips brushing the smooth skin there. She left a little trail of silent kisses – soft and sensual – until the tip of her tongue finally came into contact with my special treasure trove.

“Okay,” my friend said, sounding a little deflated. “Well, if you say so...”

I tried making small talk for a little while. Chatting about anything and everything I could think of – from the weather to movies to music. The kinds of things we already knew about each other.

The more we spoke, the more concerned Kas seemed to become.

“If something’s happened,” my friend told me. “I’m here. If you need someone to talk to.”

“Thank you,” I grunted. “It’s nothing, I promise.”

Kas pursed her lips.

“Look,” I said quickly, reaching down to put a hand on my roomie’s head – stilling her movements as best I could. “I’ve gotta go. Still need to call Rebs and my parents. I’ll see you soon, okay?”

Before she could reply, I ended the call.

A few moments later, I was writing in place, an orgasm washing over me. Muscles trembling, spine tingling.

In the aftermath, my brain told me to get up – to clean myself off. But my brain wasn’t in charge. My body stayed as it was, sitting at my desk with legs spread wide – relishing in the feel of my roomie’s tongue.

I found myself clicking on another friend’s profile, calling them.

“Yo,” Rebs answered surprisingly quickly. “What’s up?”

“Oh,” I forced a smile, “you know. Stuff.”