

Chapter Four

Amy wakes to the smell of freshly brewing coffee. She is disoriented at first, not recognizing the room, but memories of the night before come back to her, even as Max appears carrying a tray with a steaming French press and two mugs. “Coffee?” He says.

“Please!” Amy says. He didn’t drink that much, but he feels like he has a hangover.

Max pours two mugs, hands one to Amy. “Would the lady be wanting anything else this morning?” He says in a bad British accent. “Sorry,” he says. “A little too much Downton Abbey.”

Amy laughs and sips his coffee. “Ow!” It’s hot and burns his lips a little, but it tastes so good.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” And a new doubt and fear is starting to creep into Amy’s mind as he thinks about how caring and attentive Max seems: he can’t be real. No one is this nice. He feels nervous, thinking he should probably leave. He feels himself getting close to this man, developing feelings for him, and though it’s what he always wanted, now it feels dangerous somehow.

Max sits on the edge of the bed. “So, I was thinking we should get brunch.”

Amy scrunches up his face, trying to think of how to get out of this without being rude. He just feels he needs some time to think, process or something. “Um, that sounds great...”

“But...” Max says, the smile never leaving his face.

“I’ve gotta get back to the real world?”

“Drag,” Max says, and he seems so fine with it Amy starts wondering—was he just being nice? Does he really want me to leave? Amy just feels so confused and uncertain, struggling to decipher the clues, to figure out what’s really going on in this guy’s head. Does he like like me, or was it just a fling?

“If you can’t do brunch, how about doing something else for me before you go?”

Here it comes, Amy thinks. Something gross and perverted.

But Max just hands Amy his phone. “Let’s exchange numbers. We should get together again when our schedules match.”

“That sounds great,” Amy says, annoyed at himself for expecting the worse. Everyone in the VR had virtual contact information, so he gave Max Amy’s number.

“A bunch of my friends are getting together next week,” Max says. “You should come. They’d love you.”

Friends. It all seems too good, too impossible. Amy checks again to see if Max is even a real person, to make sure he isn’t an NPC just playing out some kind of fantasy scenario. But, no. Max is a real person. Once again, though, Amy feels suspicious. No one is this good. No one.

Amy gets dressed, and as he’s leaving, Max gives him a hug and a friendly goodbye kiss. “I am so glad we met,” he says. “I really like you, Amy.”

Back at his apartment, Amy throws himself onto the bed, giggling. He hugs his knees to his chest and rolls side to side, his hair in his face. He was no longer a virgin, and it had been everything he’d ever dreamt of and more. He wants to take the elevator to the roof and shout it to the world, “I had sex! And I loved it! A guy wanted me! Me! That’s right! He wanted me!”

Amy had never felt wanted, had never felt someone cared about him, his feelings. It was like emotional smack, and he needed and wanted more. He wanted to share it with everyone, with the whole world, or at least with someone.

He needed girlfriends, or at least a girlfriend. Another girl to talk to. Frankie? No. She didn't seem like the let's talk and braid each other's hair type. Maybe Erin? They barely knew each other.

He would meet Max's friends if he went to the party, but that was a week away. He couldn't wait, and it wouldn't be the same, but he pulled up the menu, skimmed through the choices and then picked Marci, a perky blonde "InstaFriend." It cost a hundred dollars, which he really didn't have, but he didn't care. He just had to talk to someone, even if that someone wasn't even a real person.

His phone rang. "Hey, girl," he heard Marci say. "You wanna get together?"

"Yes. Right now. Here."

The air in the room flickered and Marci materialized. "It's been too long!" She said, rushing to Amy and greeting him with a hug and air kisses. Amy couldn't wait. "I had sex!" He burst out.

"Girl, I want all the deets."

Amy had never ordered a fake friend, despite his loneliness. He'd thought it was kinda pathetic, and besides, what would they even do or talk about? Amy spent most of his time playing video games solo, and it hadn't seemed like a good use of money.

He regretted his decision now. Marci was better than real, and he couldn't help but wonder if maybe there was a real person inside that avatar. Her facial expressions and movements were so natural, but Amy

doubted there was a real person anywhere who was such a good listener. He talked and talked, sharing all the details of how he and Max had met, their whole night together.

Then, he heard a bell ring three times. “Your Instafriend session expires in 60 seconds. Renew? Let Session Expire?”

Marci froze as the system waited for Amy to respond. He’d forgotten he was talking to an AI, it had all seemed so real, and the realization that he actually didn’t have a friend, that there wasn’t a single person in the world he could talk to, really talk to, made him ache with loneliness.

Marci vanished. Amy found himself curled up in a ball, crying all the feelings he’d felt in the past 24 hours swept over him— the pure joy he’d felt with Max, the thrill when Max had said the words, “I like you.” The terror he’d felt about brunch, the void the opened up in him when his Instafriend had vanished...

And those damn voices! Worthless. Freak. Liar. Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!

Therapy hadn’t worked. Getting older, feeling depressed and suicidal, Amy had gone to see Dr. Angela White, whom he’d found on Google and chosen because she listed gender identity as one of the “issues” she helped people deal with— along with social anxiety. She’d seemed good. Compassionate. Smart. Middle-aged but still youthful looking, she wore flowing, boho dresses and gave off a distinctly Earth Mother vibe. Her office soothed. It was such a calm, welcoming space.

He talked. She listened. After only a few suggestions, she made a suggestion. “I want you to join a group on MeetPeople.com. Any group.”

“Um, yeah, that’s not something I really do.”

“It’s all about change. You’re unhappy with your life now, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

“If you keep doing what you always did, you’ll keep getting what you always got. No one said it’s going to be easy. But, you have to ask yourself, am I willing to suffer some short term discomfort to get the life I want.”

The thought was terrifying, bringing back the same hell-reel of nightmarish memories from his childhood, which he began to share with Dr. White: eating alone in the lunchroom. Even if he sat at the opposite end of a long table far away from the other kids, they would pick up their trays and leave.

Freak.

Getting on the school bus. Lots of kids sitting by themselves in two person seats, one after another blocking him from sitting, glaring at him. “No.” The bus driver screaming, “SIT DOWN!” Him, ashamed and horrified, thinking, *it’s not my fault. They won’t let me sit with them.* This happened every day. “SIT DOWN! SIT DOWN.”

Angry, hateful faces. “No.”

Freak.

Outcast.

The birthday party no one came to, the last one he would ever try to have. Balloons and decorations mocking him. A big sparkling sign that read Happy Birthday! He’d planned games. They had an ice cream cake. He’d been excited for weeks, thinking about how much fun he and the other kids would have. It was his birthday, and he just wanted to be like the other kids. He just wanted to be liked.

And no one came. Not one person. His mother was furious— at him. “Why don’t you have any friends?” She said, cigarette in hand. “Why can’t you just be like other kids?”

I don't know, he'd thought. I don't know. What's wrong with me?

The ice cream cake melted, sagging, oozing across the plastic plate. "All this money wasted!" Mom said, taking the cake and throwing it into the trash, tearing down the Happy Birthday sign, ripping it into pieces.

Freak. Outcast, Loser.

He'd started crying, and his mother had slit her glassy eyes at him and said, "I don't even like you."

The therapist had helped him understand. His mother was embarrassed, took his failure as somehow a reflection on her motherhood. The anger, Dr White explained, was misdirected— self-hate.

Amy had withdrawn. He'd never shared any of this with anyone. "I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"I understand," Dr. White said, "but I am afraid you're going to have to confront the fact that your mother didn't love you."

He'd found a MeetPeople group— they were a group of actors and filmmakers. Amy had always wanted to be an actor. He thought it would be a way to escape from himself, to be someone else, someone better.

They met in a rehearsal studio a circle of chairs arranged on the off-white tile rubber floor: one wall was a floor to ceiling mirror. Amy chose a seat to the back of the mirror. He hated the sight of himself. The group did a script reading. He was given a part to read. After, one of the guys came up to him. "My name is Raj. I'm making a short film," he said. "You'd be perfect for the part of Henry."

"That's so cool. Yes. I want to do it." Amy couldn't believe it. Just like that! He felt like he was part of the group. He had friends. They liked him. Raj sent him the script, and he did not like the part. He would play a bitter, angry, racist loner.

Other than the racist part, it was too close to home. Is that how they had seen him? Just on that first meeting?

No. No.

It's just a part. Just acting. It was his first part, and he was so excited. He spent hours learning his lines, practicing how he would say them. The shoot was—magical. Cameras and lights. A guy with a microphone on a long pole. They did it all in one day, and when they finished Raj had said, “great, great, great. It was a pleasure working with you.”

The next month, he showed up at the rehearsal studio, and there was no one there. He messaged the group. “We’re so sorry!” Came the answer. “We changed locations and totally forgot to tell you, since you’re new.”

Amy spent a day in a shame spiral. They hate me, he thought. They hate me, and they are just toying with me, mocking me. But, no. They’d all seemed so nice. He was over-reacting. He had to trust people, and he wanted to be part of the group.

The next month, it happened again. Empty room. More apologies.

Freak. Outcast. Loser.

Chapter Five

Max’ party turned out to be a picnic. He sent Amy the invitation— it featured a dancing dog with the message, “Let’s Get *Fun-ky*.” It was so dorky. Amy loved it. RSVP.

Amy had opened it at work, back in the flesh world. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one was peeking into his cubicle, and he started to click Attending, but his hand froze as he remembered it all again— the therapist had been wrong. Getting out had only confirmed that people saw him as a weird loser. He had not made any friends. Nothing had changed.

All that would happen if he went to the party was that Max would see what a freak he was, and it would be over.

He moved the mouse, hovering over *Decline*.

He moved it again, to *Maybe*. He clicked.

He probably wouldn't go. Maybe he wouldn't go. He didn't know.

Now that he'd taken the plunge as Amy, real life work sucked even more. "Real" life sucked even more. He'd gotten a taste of what life was like— could be like— for Amy. For him. It was so different and so good, and he felt even more disgusted to be back in this male flesh sack, back in this life of complete and total wrong. As soon as he got home from work, he logged into the system and sighed with relief as he once more found himself in Amy's body— his real body.

He thought about going back to the club. Having lost his cherry, he wanted more— he'd Webhunted "best sex positions for women" and found articles with graphics. Just looking at some of them had made him thirsty and hot. But, Max. He felt like it would be cheating on Max, even though they'd only slept together once and they weren't even in a committed relationship. Max was just— could he be the one?

Amy felt silly even thinking such a thought. It was such a childish fantasy. But— could he?

Amy sighed. It didn't matter. He just couldn't stand the thought of sleeping with someone else, Max finding out. It felt wrong and weird and if he was going to obsess over Max shouldn't he at least go to the picnic? Come on, Amy. Get it together.

He decided to stay in, curl up on the couch with a glass of wine and watch a movie. It was a romantic comedy about a couple who are sent on a space mission together. Just the two of them in a small ship for months.

Of course, they instantly hate each other and bicker endlessly, but then end up falling in love. Amy found himself crying, dabbing at the corner of his eye with a tissue.

As the movie ended, and he thought about heading to bed, spending the night as Amy, he started to worry about money again. He was burning through it rapidly, and the day would come at this rate where all his credit cards would be maxed out, and he'd be locked out of Amy's life. How insane was it to watch a movie here, when he could have watched the same exact movie in the flesh world for free? How could he even think about paying to sleep as Amy, when he would be *unconscious*?

None of it made sense, and yet all of it made sense. Logically, no. Logically, it made no sense to spend money like this, to live in a fantasy world. But there was something much stronger in Amy's mind that told him what was really true— intuition.

He was doing what he needed to do. Living his truth. And somehow, some way, everything would work out as long as he kept doing that. He'd tried the path of logic, of doing what "made sense" and he'd ended up sprawled on the cold tile floor of his bathroom in a pool of his own vomit, an open jar of sleeping pills clutched in his hand. When the EMTs had lifted him, put him on a stretcher, he'd felt defeated. No, he thought he'd mumbled, but his memories weren't clear. No. Let me die.

Logic. Common sense. Go along to get along.

All great ideas for anyone who wanted to be miserable as far as Amy was concerned. What had his heart been telling him? Go into Mindstrike. Become the woman you were meant to be.

He'd been scared, but he'd done it, and he'd had the two greatest experiences of his whole life as a result. It was no longer a question. He

now knew that when he listened to his intuition, it led him to happiness. And what was his intuition telling him now?

He opened Max' invitation, and changed his reply to Attending. And then, he logged out of Mindstrike, immediately feeling that sinking feeling of being back in the real world, back in the stupid, mis-formed shape of his own body. He didn't do it because it made sense. He did it because he wanted to spend more time living as Amy.

He'd spent his whole real life asleep. What difference would a few more hours make?

Amy spent hours trying to decide what outfit to wear to the picnic. He thought about skirts and shorts, flirty dresses, sunglasses and wedge sandals versus sneakers. Mostly, though, he thought about Max. What would Max like? What would give Max the right impression? He'd already seen Amy all dressed up for a night at the club. Now, he would see daytime Amy, and Amy wanted to look just right, to be exactly the kind of girl Max could see himself with, could imagine as a— okay, admit it— partner.

Oh! Amy had always wanted a boyfriend in a vague, dreamy kind of way. When he'd been a teenager, he'd watched *The Look* a thousand times. It was about an "ugly duckling" girl. One of the guys takes a bet that he can turn her into the prettiest, most popular girl in the school, and of course, he does, and Amy loved to watch that movie, pretending he was that girl and every romantic moment was too sweet, too perfect, and especially the scene where the guy picked her up and held her in the air as he kissed her.

Amy spent hours just replaying that scene in his mind, imagining what it would feel like to be lifted up like that, so small and

Amy tried all different looks and— sporty, girly, sophisticated, punk. It was so easy in Mindstrike. All you had to do was pick the clothes out of your inventory if you wanted to do things the easy way, and today he did. You could even virtually try on clothes from the online catalog, so it was basically a feast of fashion as Amy clicked on different outfits, turned and looked at himself from different angles, struck different poses, giggled and then tried on another one...

He looked super cute in everything but finally settled on a floral dress with a loose, flowing skirt, a floppy straw hat and wedge sandals. It was a very sweet, feminine look, and he felt like it would give Max all the right signals. Now, if he could just figure out which bag to bring and what about sunglasses?

Oh, no, he thought, smirking. I guess I'll have to do another outfit montage for my accessories!

Life as a girl is sooooo hard, he giggled, throwing himself on his bed, laughing. He needed a sec before he dug into his collection of sunglasses— he'd bought a few pair of the oversized, 60s movie star style glasses that had come back and been all the rage, but were they still the rage in Mindstrike? Hmmmmnnn. Max struck Amy as the kind of guy who wanted his woman to be on trend. Mindstrike had spawned its own mediasphere- magazines, videos and podcasts all dedicated to “life” in the VR world. A lot of real world media companies had created Mindstrike versions of their real world publications with content specific to the Mindstrike experience.

Of course, just like in the real world, a lot of people were obsessed with fashion and so there were plenty of sources for what was in style right now and what would be in style this spring and what different VR influencers

were wearing and... Amy loved all of it. He sat down and started searching for articles on trendy sunglasses and he was so relieved to see the oversized frames were still in style, because he, actually, loved loved loved them.

He tried on a pair, pretending he was smoking a cigarette with a long extender. "My darling," he said, perfectly imitating the affected Hollywood accent of 50s starlet Helen Brooks. "We simply must do lunch sometime."

Amy giggled, posed, turning his head side to side. *Of course Classic Helens are still in style*, he thought, putting the glasses up up his hair. *They're called timeless for a reason.*

He put them back over his eyes, then put his hand to his cheek, remembering one of his all time favorite scenes from Morocco: "I'm scared and afraid and I don't know what to do," Helen had whispered, black and white shadows falling across her face. "Tell me what to do!"

"You don't need to worry, doll," Hunter Bough had said, grabbing her arms and pushing her against a wall. "I won't let anything happen to you. And, as for what you should do..." He cupped her chin, tilted her head back and kissed her. "Just hold my hand, and don't let go."