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EMERSON
FREEDMAN

Chapter 1: Funny that

Vibrations shuddering up the steering column threaten to shake Jacob's sweaty grip free. A thumb-flick downshifted engine growl and Jacob nearly misses the hidden driveway tucked innocently between a small copse of apple trees and weeping willows. Jacob pulls up outside the guard hut. He is in a foul mood. The sun-dappled ride on Bessie through the golden Surrey countryside has done little to cheer him up. He scowls petulantly at the brightly painted leaves before turning his attention to the breathing dark inside the hut.

"You gonna open up or what?" The silhouette of a mountain shifts. Shadows shudder as the massive guard hops from his stool. Greasy creases stretch smooth with each step as the guard approaches. Jacob waits patiently as the fat man hesitates in the doorway.

Jacob opens his mouth to hurry the guard then shuts it again. A dozen picketers appear yards from the guardhouse. Sunlight ripples their skin a deep blood red. Half-naked forms circle each other, prancing and chanting silently at the guard and low grey brick building just visible in the distance beyond the high chain-link fence. Jacob's heart drops into his boots. *Am I deaf?* Feeling around inside his aural cavities Jacob realises he is still wearing ear plugs. *I'm gonna leave those bastards in one day and walk in front of traffic.*

"No, more, A-Reds! No, more, A-Reds!" The chant takes on a rhythmic beat that has Jacob tapping his foot on the ground. He can make out a sprawling tent city peppering the woods just beyond the protestors. Hairy hippies happily take part in their daily toilet, washing, eating, defecating and even fornicating right out in the open. *I bet that raises a few eyebrows.*

Jacob can imagine the near misses as wandering eyes catch the double-backed horny monster show roadside. A small sports car suddenly appears, cutting a wide swathe across the lanes and catching the low curb hard enough to lift its nearside tires several inches off the tarmac. Jacob sees the sports car flip over sideways, tearing through trees before exploding in a glorious orange-yellow ball of flame. In reality the car rights itself and rockets out of sight.

"What's your business here?" demands the guard.

"I'm the lost-and-found guy your boss-man hired," Jacob tosses his head in the general direction of the low-grey cement block offices beyond the fence. Jacob fights the urge to interrogate the guard. *I haven't heard of this place in years.*

The fat man raises an eyebrow, calling unintelligibly into the radio on his shoulder. Grotesque jowls jiggle with each nod. He returns Jacob's papers and heads back into the safety of his hut. Jacob revs his engine at the slowly opening gate, his ears perking up as the chanting dies. *I wonder what the fat man would do if one of those hippies made a run for it.*

All thoughts are drowned out in the roar of Bessie's engine as Jacob readies his launch through the creaking gate. 5-4-3-2-

A huffing sweaty streak trailing unwashed righteousness brushes past Jacob as it bolts for the opening. Bessie leaps, firing Jacob's heart into his throat. For one brief moment she is heading

straight for the half-naked man. Jacob winces as he kicks her back into neutral. Empathetic pain flashes across his face as she screams in frustration.

Jacob turns to warn the guard when a large blur flashes by in front of him. His eyes catch up with the blur just as the guard intercepts the hippy. A pathetic ‘oomph’ is followed by the slapping smack of flab slamming bony flesh into hard earth. The overweight guard stands triumphantly over the scrambled remains of the runaway hippy, one foot planted on the scrawny man’s back. Jacob’s eyes track back to the still dark hut.

Fifty yards in two seconds. The fat man had barely broken a sweat. *Not possible.* Jacob opens his mouth. The guard winks and tips his cap, motioning at the now fully opened gate. Jacob shuts his mouth, shakes his head, and throws his bike into gear. *I seriously need a vacation.* A disused airstrip opens up before him as he passes through the gate. Butterflies burst into flight in his chest as his front wheel lifts from the tarmac. Bessie roars with joy as man and bike tear off down the runway.

Chapter 2: The creeps

“I told you not to put that god-damn coffee cup there! Can’t you follow a simple god-damn request without someone having to draw you a god-damn map?” Victoria is tired of babysitting Finn. *You couldn’t organise a piss-up in a brewery. Remind me why we hired you.* Victoria takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly. *Not worth stressing over.* Each time she looks at Finn she wants to shout at him and beat him to the ground. *Bastard left that cup of coffee so close to the server I nearly dowsed it when I turned around.* Victoria fights the urge to christen Finn with the burnt black mush. *Serve you right, behaving like a two-year-old.*

“How was I supposed to know you would put that there?” Victoria’s best death stare fails to stem the growing tide of Finn’s whinge, “I can’t be held responsible for you putting the damn mainframe just anywhere, can I? Besides, I always put my coffee mug there-” a camp flop of his wrist points out the browning circle of drying coffee on the granite-black surface, “-notice the stains on the console table?” Victoria digs her fingernails into her palms, *Oh please. Just one little slap.*

The glint in her eye and half-hidden evil grin are completely missed by Finn. “What the hell are you talking about? That is where the mainframe belongs, numb-nuts.” Razors embed themselves in her suddenly velvety voice. “Notice the label on the table, ‘Wireless Mainframes’?” Victoria points at the black on white label below Finn’s coffee stains. She slides her wrap-around TV glasses down her nose with one pinkie to give him the death stare, *You idiot.*

To his credit Finn holds Victoria’s angry glare for almost a minute before folding and stomping off to the kitchen. Victoria watches his glasses dangle dangerously down near his jaw. *I bet they get broken by the end of the day.* Black corrosive looking stains scar Finn’s previously pristine console, *Is that ketchup?* Finn’s fibreglass specs clatter onto the kitchen counter. Victoria considers calling the Chairman. *No, She straightens her shoulders. I can sort this thing out for myself.* No more putting up with Finn’s tantrums. *It’s going to be my way or the highway.*

Victoria opens her mouth to call Finn back to his desk when her console chimes. She throws one last frustrated glance at Finn’s hunched back as he plays with the noisy coffee machine before plugging in both of her ear pieces and answering the call.

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Finn was in the kitchen, baking an apple pie, thinking of picking up the steak knife and sticking it in Victoria’s-, Finn catches himself before the fantasy can go any further. *Make love not war, man.*

Finn smiles as his imagination floats away to a distant Utopia where he and Victoria are happily married with kids, living in a house by the sea, *If only.*

Focus. Finn fumbles frustratingly with the pieces of plastic. *How the hell do these go together?* Preternatural silence settles over him. Finn’s fingers freeze. His breath catches in his throat. The hairs on his neck stand on end. *She’s right behind me.*

The light susurrations of Victoria’s voice wafts into the kitchen to tickle Finn’s earlobes, simultaneously sending chills up his spine. He can make out the ticking of acrylic nails on glass

keys. *Calm down, man, she's working.*

Finn does not need to look to see her. His mind fills with the image of her perfect neck arching forward as she focuses on her screen. Her delicately graceful fingers tap lightning quick in rhythm with her moving lips. He loves the fact that she mouths what she is typing. *So cute! And her smile!* Even the angry glare of her beautiful eyes strips his heart bare. It is enough to drive any man crazy. *She is gorgeous.* Finn smiles to himself, *One day...*

Snap out of it, man! Finn's grin twists into a grimace as his fiddling fingers find yet another way not to connect the three pieces of plastic. *What the hell were they thinking?* He pauses mid-fidget to singe his taste buds on foul lava. Caffeine pulsing violently in his right temple makes it difficult to concentrate. *I need a cigar.*

Finn's mind conjures up the look of irritation Victoria had fired his way only a moment ago. The image dissolves in a moment of elation as the pieces click together to form a tiny plastic 'L'. Finn sighs deeply. The plastic piece lies pathetically dead in his hand. *Who am I kidding? She would never go for me, even if I didn't act like a total goof-ball.*

I could sell this and go on the run with Victoria. The beach home and running, laughing children resurfaces for a moment. *What if this is some sort of colossal leg-pull?* The dust of despair settles heavily on his shoulders. *She is never going to be with me, and I'm never going to get this bloody spying thing off the ground.* He stares hard at the plastic L. *How do you work, dammit?*

His stress ramps up. *Victoria is going to get suspicious.* He turns over the plastic piece. There are no lights or buttons. He holds the L close to his face, looking for the hairline cracks he knows exist. *Come on you bastards, where are you?* Anxiety makes his hands sweaty. The plastic L slides across his slick palm and nearly topples into the sink. He can imagine it slipping down the drain and out of his life forever. *Chance would be a fine thing.*

What the? Finn turns over the L a few more times wondering what had caught his attention. Nothing about the small piece of plastic stands out. Finn's eyes follow his hand as he goes to dump it on the counter. An LED light flickers just outside his area of focus. A few hand passes with the L confirms his first thought.

The coffee machine! Finn holds the plastic L in front of the coffee machine's screen, which flashes bright red blue and green in response.

Ok, so now what? He scans the front of the unit closely. What he had originally mistaken for a coffee tray turns out to be just the right shape and size for the L. Finn slides it in. A small plastic cover slides down nearly nipping his finger in the process.

The small screen stops flashing blue and green, settling instead on fuzzy grey. Finn leans forward until his nose is almost touching the machine. He can make out a tiny grey room. A pixelated face fills the screen. Finn lurches back, sitting down hard and slamming his back against the metal table-top. His hands grip the bench as he holds his breath. After a few moments of nothing Finn hoists himself up. He creeps closer to the machine, peering intently at the screen. *Could be a man.* The face is digitised beyond recognition, *Could be anyone.*

“Are you done playing?” shouts a voice inches from Finn’s ear. He grabs the counter glancing furtively past the edge of the door as his legs turn to jelly. Victoria is off in her own world typing and chatting away. *How do I turn the sound down?*

“Apologies, is this better?” the same voice replies quietly.

Finn smiles and nods at the screen. *Yes, thank you.* The shadow seems to be waiting for something. Realisation dawns on Finn. *Oh my god! Are you in my head?* The shadow-man nods gently. *If only the boys back at Uni could see me now.*

“If you told them we’d have to kill you.” There was a pause. “And them.”

Finn’s jelly legs turn to lead. *What?*

“Relax. We’re just testing our emotional barometers. You passed.”

An implant that read minds.

“Yes.”

And emotions.

“Emotional states, to be precise. Interpretation is a little more difficult, because emotions are extremely personal. Once we get to know each other better our ability to read your true emotional state will improve. But it will never be perfect.”

Don’t focus on anything.

“Nice try.”

Damn. This is going to be hard.

“Spot on.”

Stop it! Finn’s brain goes cross-eyed as he tries thinking nothing at all. *I am in control.*

Can you hear me when I’m not near the coffee machine?

“Sometimes faintly but the range is not all that great, especially with the electromagnetic field pulsing through the operations centre. When you walk near the patching cabinet we lose you completely. Presumably this is to protect the wireless connections inside from external interference.”

What do I need to do now?

“Just what we asked you to do in the first place. You need to dig up the information for your article, remember. We will give you the rest of what we have in exchange for what we need.”

Finn feels he is going crazy. *You are talking to a coffee machine in your mind, how sane can you be?* The man on screen does not respond. *Is that all you wanted to tell me?*

“For now, that’s it. But you have to work fast. We don’t know how long we can keep Ben safe before they close the loop.” The voice pauses for a moment before continuing in a much more serious tone, “If you are still there when they finally close the loop you are on your own. We cannot help you.”

I know that.

“Yes, we know you know. We just want this to be completely clear. When this is all over you must disappear. Staying out in the open is not an option.”

Why, what can they do once I publish?

“First of all you will have to find a way to stay alive before you publish. Then you will have to find a way to stay alive after you publish. Now you know what you have to do. Get on with it.” The screen goes blank.

Finn puts a hand to his temple where his caffeine migraine has returned. *Why me?* He knows the truth, *I volunteered.* His hands slide uselessly across the front of the coffee machine in a desperate attempt to release the L. A grin breaks across his face loosening tense shoulders. *First I'm talking to a machine, now I'm molesting it.* He gives up on removing the L and punches in his favourite drink. Finn's fingers tap the LED screen as the machine gurgles. *Ouch! You're poking me the eye.* His grin breaks into a toothy smile. Finn jerks his hand back as if burned as the machines gears grind beans loudly.

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Ben has no idea where his feet are taking him. What seemed like the beginning of a city now ends in a massive two lane highway reaching off into the distance. There is no sidewalk.

He hops the low wooden fence and heads out across the open field, keeping the road to his left. He does not want to stray too far from the main route to London. Wide eyes trace the white-scudding clouds tripping softly across the surprisingly blue sky. He can see the alley in front of him, dank smelling brick lining the path to the door, *My door.*

A sinking feeling anchors Ben's feet. He is back in Guildford, staring up at the skinless boy dangling from the window like dirty laundry. Ben's heart is racing. *What if the killer catches up with me?* Ben hyperventilates. The world leans slowly to one side as his brain is starved of oxygen. Ben takes a slow deep breath, forcing himself back to the present. *I will not end up like him.*

Broad daylight shines down around him. Cars blur by on the six-lane motorway. The panic attack returns. *I'm exposed, they'll see me.*

Ghostly fingers caress his forehead, brushing the hair out of his eyes. *You have to keep moving.* Ben can feel his legs again. *That's it. You have to come home to me, to safety.*

Ben strikes off across the field enjoying the scent of freshly laid manure and turned grass. He catches himself smiling as the sun shines down on him. His feet sink deeply into deliciously squelching mud. Blue sky kisses the tree-rimmed horizon beckoning him onwards.

It's good to be alive.

Chapter 3: A light in the attic

The temperature drops several degrees as the door swings closed behind Jacob. The entrance hall is at once immense and cosy, like walking into his grandfather's book-lined study. Instead of wood-trimmed antique shelves, expanses of whitewashed walls reach up from the marble-effect tiled floor to the vaulted mirrored ceiling overhead. Jacob smiles to himself, looking up at his tiny alter-ego crawling across the ceiling, imagining being a child all over again. So intent is he on the mini-Jacob on the ceiling that he nearly walks into the extensive receptionist desk at the far end of the hall. It is only when he sees the change in texture of the floor in the reflected reality above him that he is able to pull his gaze back down onto the mahogany crescent expanse. *Must be fake*. Even when The Company had first started this amount of wood would have cost a small fortune.

Gorgeous polished wood stretches back into the ample chest of the most attractive young lady Jacob has ever seen. She perches patiently yet pointedly on the other side of the ostentatious desk in a high-backed ergonomic chair, waiting for Jacob to notice her presence. Inch-long ornately painted fingernails curled delicately away from long thin fingers. An icy smile traces her ruby lips. Her hair piles upwards in a gravity-defying reverse cascade of golden brown before folding itself back into a tight bun. The end of a neat ponytail is just visible against the outline of her neck. Jacob's gaze traces fair smooth skin up to her straight jaw line then back down again into the plunging hemline of her loose-fitting blouse.

“Ahem.”

Jacob tears his wandering eyes away from her ample assets while fighting a losing battle against a rising blush. His chest still throbs from Bessie's thunderous roar. The insides of his thighs are hot and still vibrating from the pulse of the engine. Once again Jacob fights the urge to be drawn back down into the receptionist's perfect cleavage. He swallows what little saliva he has and opens his mouth to speak.

“The doctor's been expecting you,” states the receptionist whilst peering at him over her glasses. Disdainfully pursed lips only make his heart race faster. Jacob finds himself shrinking and growing at the same time. *God help me*. He desperately wants to know her name. His heart sinks in his chest as he realises he has lost the initiative.

“You're late.” Dismissal in her voice pushes his eyes down until he is studying the floor. Ears burning, he can hear her painted nails tapping the lightboard.

“Sir?” Jacob looks up hopefully. She raises a finger to shush him while she talks into her headset. “Mr. Chairman, your afternoon appointment is here.” She presses a key on her lightboard and looks at Jacob with one eyebrow raised expectantly.

“Jacob Jacobi.”

She repeats his name into her headset. “Yes, ok. I'll tell him.”

Her business-like gaze catches his. Jacob's heart melts into his shoes, *Take me, I'm yours*. Her lips are moving but he cannot make out anything over the deafening thud of his own heart.

Jacob asks her to repeat herself. She shoots him a look of irritated disbelief, enunciating very slowly as if he is stupid, “The Chairman said you should speak with the doctor first. Then, when you are happy you have all of the information you need, you can speak with the Chairman, who will give you the file on our lost property. Understand?” Jacob nods dumbly. The receptionist dismisses him with a look of disdain and returns to her work.

Jacob’s eyes once again trace the delicate pale skin from her neckline downwards. He cannot remember ever being so completely discombobulated by a woman. The warm throbbing in his thighs pulses in time with his heart. His breath catches in his throat. His cheeks flush crimson as unspeakable thoughts dance into his mind. He leans one arm on the receptionist’s desk bringing him close enough to smell her sweet perfume. An uncontrollable smile splits his face.

The receptionist looks at his hand, her eyes tracing up his arm to his grinning face. He can see his own goofy desire mirrored in her irritated gaze. Jacob quickly pulls his hand back and stands awkwardly in front of her for a moment before realising he has been dismissed. For the life of him he cannot remember her directions to the doctor’s lab, nor to the Chairman’s office. Considering the size of the building he has no intention of wandering the hallways for the next few hours as the sun sets outside.

“The doctor’s office is?”

The look of exasperation is immediately covered up by cool efficiency. A perfectly sculpted outstretched arm points in the direction of the staircase that leads up from the side of the desk. “Upstairs, first door on your left is the doctor’s office,” she pauses long enough to make sure this has sunk in, “And from the doctor’s office, walk up another two flights of stairs. At the end of the hall you will find the Chairman’s office. There is a set of large double-doors leading to his study. You can’t miss it.” Two raised eyebrows punctuate the end of their conversation.

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Victoria flicks the lightboard to standby, stands and stretches. That last conversation has left her feeling dirty. *What was with that creep?* She stretches her arms, resting her palms on the back of the two hoverchairs only to realise Finn is still off with the faeries. *Where is my very own personal creep?*

Clocking the doorway to the kitchen she can just make out his back edged against the inside of the door frame. *Lazy bastard, skiving off in the kitchen!* He must have been in there a good twenty minutes by now.

From where she stands, she can see him still huddled conspiratorially over the counter. His head is tucked into his chest, his shoulders hunched around his ears, *What is he up to?*

Whatever he is doing takes all of his focus and attention. Victoria fights the urge to call out, deciding instead to surprise him. An unwanted image flashed into her mind, *Maybe I should call out for him instead.* Curiosity and gleeful malevolence battle it out in her chest. Curiosity wins with a little help from suspicion. Her intuition is singing, *That boy’s not right.*

Victoria makes it halfway to the kitchen before realising she is tiptoeing. She feels silly, yet the

closer she comes to Finn's hunched back, the more she is sure he is hiding something.

What are you doing? She cannot imagine anything in the kitchen that would retain his interest for that long, *Unless he's doing something dodgy*. He had been scanned for electronic devices when he entered the building, so she was sure he was not calling anyone or playing with a game system. She felt oddly annoyed that he was keeping secrets from her. *Am I jealous?*

The Chairman had been adamant about not allowing technology into the building, no matter how innocuous, especially since the escape of their prized possession. Victoria had wanted to tell him that was a bit like closing the barn door after the horses had bolted. But you did not ridicule the Chairman and expect to survive. These thoughts trail her all the way to the kitchen. The last few steps seem to take an eternity.

Victoria considers stepping noisily into the kitchen when Finn twitches. She freezes halfway through the doorway, her face a comic contortion of embarrassment and fearful anticipation, *If he turns around now, he's going to know I was sneaking up on him*. A mischievous smile splits her face. She strides boldly through the doorway shouting, "Finn, it's your turn on the comms now!" as if she has been calling for him the entire time. Guilty pleasure tickles the corners of her mouth as Finn jumps visibly, followed by a string of swearwords. Victoria suppresses a snort. Her momentary remorse wilts under the impotent blow torch of Finn's anger.

"Do you always sneak up on people like that?" Finn looks ridiculous, soaked in coffee and fuming. A dirty mist rises damply from his trousers. He is too busy being indignant to notice his skin is burning. "That's not very professional of you. You made me spill coffee all down my front." Finn looks down to illustrate the mess, only then noticing the coffee on his crotch, "Damn!" He dances in a tiny circle pulling his soaked trousers away from delicate skin. Victoria snorts. She moves to help him but he pushes her hand away. Soaking a corner of a paper towel he douses his belly and trousers in freezing cold water. Victoria fights to control herself, *If I laugh now he is going to explode*.

"What, you think this is funny? I nearly castrated myself with coffee there."

Victoria tries desperately to keep a straight face. Another snort breaks through tightly-clenched lips. She opens her mouth to apologise then decides against it, instead backing out of the room under Finn's baleful glare. All thoughts of catching him out have disappeared. Instead a gleeful smile tickles the corners of her mouth. *He is going to be so uncomfortable for the rest of the day. Serves him right*.

"Your console's ringing!" She can hear him shuffling somewhere out of sight. Part of her wants to rush back in and catch him in whatever ridiculous state he is in. *I can take some pictures for posterity's sake*. She takes a step towards the kitchen just as Finn appears in the doorway. Damp paper towels poke out from his half-open fly. She chokes down a giggle when she catches his furious gaze. *No sense of humour*. Victoria nods at his blinking console, "You're up. Time to earn your keep."

Finn points accusingly at the damp patch reaching from his waist down to his knees, "Can't you

take this one?" Finn misses Victoria's sarcastically saucy look. "I'm soaked through." He shakes one leg to dry his crotch faster whilst brushing uselessly with a soaked towel.

Victoria is suddenly drained. "This one's yours. The console is coded for your voice. You need to answer. Otherwise we'll have a transgender conflict in the run. It's not good for the system. It throws up all sorts of anomalies." With that she turns her back on him and sits at her own console. Before he can respond she is hard at work, typing away at her lightboard. *And I'll be damned if I'm going to do what little work you've been hired to do, for you.*

She would not have chosen Finn if it were up to her. He was obviously disorganised and sloppy at best, lazy and stupid at worst. *Not exactly the type of person you want around all of this equipment.* She thinks of the damage he could do by clumsily dumping one of his disgusting coffees over the server cabinet. *At least then I'd have a reason to get rid of him. It can only be a matter of time.* Finn's squishy progress back to his hoverchair puts a smile back on her face. She listens to him angrily mutter his way through plugging in and logging on. *That's right, we all have to work, no matter what state we are in.* Her grin widens as she fights the urge to glance at him. *The show must go on.*