

STALKER

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CHAPTER 1

If Aashif Rahmed could have got away with it, he would never have read another book again.

It wasn't that he couldn't read, it was simply that he hated reading novels. They were boring and long, and half the time they were filled with stupid people who took an entire book to do something that Aashif reckoned he could do in ten minutes. Why would you ever go to the strange old house when your car had broken down? Why not just call up your dad on your phone? People in books were idiots.

That said, there were other things that Aashif liked to read. He loved books about cars, and he was always on the Internet looking up websites about cars and sports modifications. When he left school he wanted to be a mechanic – not one of those greasy-overall, work-experience no-hopers in the Fit-Quick garages, Aashif saw himself as head of a pit-stop crew, fixing up Formula One or Nascar cars as they raced for big money.

And so Aashif was always on the computer, at home and at school, always looking on the supercar news sites, always making sure that he was up to date with the latest modifications. And, of course, while he was online he was also checking his email and Facebook pages.

It was on a Wednesday morning that the ‘friend’ request came in for the first time. Aashif was using one of the library computers during morning break, and had been reading about the new Subaru, when in the right-hand corner of the screen a small box suddenly popped up.

'Iknowyoursecret' would like to be your friend.

YES / NO?

Aashif stared at the box for a moment. Usually a picture of the person, or their real name would appear with the Facebook request, but for some reason they were missing. No real name? No 'friending'. It could have been anyone: Gary Lucas having a laugh; scary Trish from year seven who wouldn't take the hint that Aashif didn't fancy her. Moving the mouse pointer to the box, he clicked NO before looking back to the webpage he was reading.

'Iknowyoursecret' would like to be your friend.

YES / NO?

Aashif stopped as the box popped up again. Looking up from the computer, he scanned the library, seeing who else was on the computers. It was a busy break and all twelve were taken, but none of the students was anyone Aashif knew. He sat back, frowning. Who did he know who would play a trick like this on him? Getting angry now, he clicked NO again.

'I know your secret' would like to be your friend.

YES / NO?

“Oh come on!” Aashif said aloud, standing up now, looking at the other computer users. “Who’s doing this?”

But there was no answer. One of the students, a year nine, looked at her friend and giggled. Aashif was about to storm over to her and demand that she stop, but then he saw her point at a picture on the screen. They were giggling over some stupid pop band. Sitting back down, Aashif clicked NO a third and final time.

Nothing happened. No new request appeared. Aashif started to relax.

It was the laughing that made him tense up again. First the two girls again, then a spotty year seven across from him. Then another. One by one, every other computer user in the library had started to laugh, pointing at their screen, calling their friends over. And then, one by one, they all

looked at Aashif. Rising from his chair, he looked at one of the screens, feeling a sick sensation in his gut when he saw the message now flashing on each of the eleven monitors.

Aashif Rahmed wet his bed last year.

Furious, Aashif shouted out, “Show yourself, you coward!” but nobody rose. The boxes disappeared from the screens and Aashif suddenly felt scared. It was one thing to put something up on a computer screen, but to put it up on all the screens at the same time took serious skills. Why would they say that about Aashif? And, more importantly, how did they know? It was one accident after a week of illness. Aashif had never told another living soul. Only his mother knew, and she’d never have spoken of it. So who did?

‘I know your secret’ would like to be your friend.

YES / NO / MESSAGE?

Aashif looked at the flashing box, noticing the addition. Pressing the ‘Message’ option, he opened up another window.

‘Who are you? Why are you doing this to me?’ he typed, hitting return and looking around the library to see who would reply. There was a year eleven who picked up his smartphone as it beeped, and for a moment Aashif wondered if he was the one doing this, but the boy put the phone back down without replying, and a second later a reply appeared on Aashif’s screen.

I’m you, Aashif. I’ve always been you.

Aashif looked at the screen in confusion. What did they mean? What kind of sick game were they playing?

‘Iknowyoursecret’ would like to be your friend.
YES / NO?

Aashif didn’t hit NO. Instead he turned the computer off at the socket. As the screen

powered off he grabbed his bag and ran from the library, convinced that he could hear the laughter of the other students behind him. Someone was playing a dangerous game, and Aashif was going to make them pay.