

## DEADSTREAM – Chapter 1

The internet is a graveyard. Full of broken links. Inactive forums. Unloadable images. Ghost traffic from automated processes churning out useless data. The social media profiles of the dead.

Teresa refreshes the page. She refreshes it again. And again.

In the upper-left corner: the same picture of Becks, as always. Wry smile. Bangs askew. Her hand a blur as she reaches up to brush them out of her eyes. At the top of the page, her full name: Rebecca Crenley.

Beneath it, her last post.

May 27 at 1:26 A.M.

Ah yes the high-pitched squealing of the spinny plate in my broken microwave when I try to heat a mug of water that shit is my JAM

Such a silly post, and yet every word of it is burned into Teresa's memory now. She's read it at least once every day for the past year.

Teresa refreshes. The page blinks away and then back, the same as before. Beck's smile, her last post. No hint of what was going to happen.

On her worst days, Teresa just sits here, refreshing over and over, staring so hard at the picture of Becks she can almost imagine it is moving, almost imagine it is gazing back.

Her therapist says this is an unhealthy coping mechanism, but Teresa can't bring herself to stop. She is addicted to that infinitesimal moment of hope each time the page reloads. Maybe this time it will be different. Maybe this time something will change.

But it never does. It never will. Becks is gone. She isn't coming back.

Teresa pushes back from her computer, rolls her desk chair over to the window. The oak tree in neighbor #2's yard catches the glow of the evening sun, soaring branches painted with orange light.

It's been almost two months now since Teresa last went outside.

Four months since she went any further than her own backyard.

Across the alleyway, neighbor #3 is letting out their dog. Squirrels zip along the power lines like an extra current. A V of geese knives into view overhead. Teresa's phone dings.

A notification: Brick has just gone live.

Teresa turns away from the real window to the other window, the better window. Through this one she can see not just a few backyards but the whole world. She pulls up Brick's stream on her laptop, which she's configured as a second monitor, and starts a screen recording. On her primary monitor, she opens her video editing software, ready in case she wants to make a clip. The "stream starting soon" screen gives way to Brick's face.

"Hello, boys," he thunders, grinning into the camera, positively bursting with energy drink exuberance. "Today is a very special day. We did it! We hit 30,000 subscribers."

A sharp knock. Teresa jumps, spins around just in time to see her bedroom door creaking open.

"Hey, honey," her mother says, poking her head around the doorframe. "Am I interrupting?"

Teresa's parents won't let her put a lock on her door. She'd been asking since before the accident, but it's taken on a new importance now. She's tried to explain that it's partially for their own good. What if she's streaming? Do they really want to be suddenly exposed to a bunch of internet strangers? Her mother said she'd just knock first.

Teresa pulls off her headphones. "I guess not."

"You coming down to dinner tonight?"

This is a formality more than a real question. Her mother's tone makes it clear that she already knows the answer. Is already disappointed.

"Not tonight," says Teresa. It has been six days since she last went downstairs.

Her mother pushes the door further open, steps all the way inside the room. Teresa tenses. She hates that anyone can barge in at any time. She'd feel so much safer with a lock.

"Can you try, honey?" her mom says. "I think it would mean a lot to Jason. He had a tough day at

school today.”

Teresa doesn't answer. She is gritting her teeth. Her anxiety is rising, a faint but persistent hum. She wants her mom to leave. She wants to be alone.

Her mom is wrong, anyway. Jason, her little brother, doesn't want to see her. She supposes they'd been growing apart for a while, even before the accident, but in the last few weeks he hasn't spoken a single word to her. If they pass in the hallway, he ignores her, glaring down at the floor. Two days ago, he had a friend over after school. She overheard them in the hallway as they walked by her door. The friend had asked, “Is that your sister's room?”

Jason's reply: “I don't have a sister.”

“Who's that?” her mom asks, gesturing at Teresa's computer.

“Brick.”

“Oh. Is he one of your friends?”

Teresa rolls her eyes. “No.”

She's told her mom who Brick is—the first streamer she ever watched, the one who inspired her to start making her own content. She's also told her mom the names of the friends she streams with—Ozma, Jolley, Pete45, RnBw, Sparklekitty—and shown her pictures of them, but her mom insists she can't keep “all those internet people” straight. She doesn't quite see them as real, Teresa suspects. It's funny—sometimes they seem more real to Teresa than anyone else.

Her mother leans against the doorframe. She looks like she is getting comfortable, like she intends to stay and chat. “What's he doing?” she asks.

Teresa glances back at her desk. Her setup isn't exactly fancy—an old dusty tower and monitor, plus a laptop beside it. The laptop was a birthday gift from her parents a few months back. She's pretty sure they were hoping its portability would encourage her to spend more time out of the house. Instead, she's used it to go further inward.

On the laptop screen, Brick is speaking, though there's no sound, his voice lost in the headphones sitting on the desk. Teresa reaches over, slams the laptop shut, a little more aggressively than she meant to.

“Nothing,” she says.

Her mother looks hurt. She opens her mouth, seems about to protest, then waves her hand, a slight gesture, as if brushing something away. “Well, I’ll make a plate for you then.”

She heads back downstairs. The minute she’s out of sight, Teresa jumps up and closes her door. Not quite a slam. But firmly shut.

She leans against the door, takes a deep breath, feeling a mix of guilt and relief. Her mother means well. She’s just trying to help. But she doesn’t understand.

Teresa needs to be alone. She needs to be in her bedroom, with the door shut. Lately, that’s the only way she feels safe. She can keep everything clean, keep everything under control. Nothing can hurt her and, just as important, she can’t hurt anyone else.

Teresa returns to her desk, reopens the laptop, slips her headphones on. She missed a little of the stream, so hopefully nothing major happened. She hits the record button again.

She is seeing Brick through a screen of course, from a great distance, but he truly does seem more real to her, in a way, than her own mother. More vivid. There is something about him. His energy, his easy laugh.

It’s like he fits into his own skin better than other people fit into theirs. Better than Teresa does, certainly. She’d always felt uneasy in her body, disconnected from it, a reluctant inhabitant.

She pulls up a video she needs to edit on her other monitor, glancing over occasionally at Brick’s stream as she works. In addition to livestreaming, Teresa runs three separate video channels: one for short clips of more popular creators, one for the recorded VOD’s of her own streams, and one for video essays analyzing streaming trends.

Onstream, Brick dumps a water bottle over his head, wetting his hair. Is that worth cutting out and posting to her clip channel?

His viewers get possessive about his hair. It’s dark brown and goes wavy when it grows out. Many fans were upset when he cut it about a month ago. Teresa had seen “in memoriam” fan art, half-joking, of course, but also half-serious.

Even she’d had a moment of dismay when she tuned in to the first stream after he chopped it off. Brief

discomfort at the change, the unfamiliarity, like a child who doesn't recognize their father after he shaves his beard.

A lot of the viewers also have raging crushes on Brick, of course. Teresa doesn't, but she understands. She wouldn't want to date him, but she often thinks she'd like to *be* him.

He is handsome, confident, enthusiastic, fun. He has the most contagious laugh. It starts small and then expands, like it is opening its arms to all fifty thousand people watching, to gather them in. To let you in.

In on the joke. In on his life. Into his bedroom every day.

He is opening his bedroom door onstream now. Teresa decides she *will* make a clip of him getting his hair wet. She ports the footage into her editing software, scrubs back to find the right moment.

Her phone buzzes. A text from her friend Ozma.

Ozma

are you watching Brick rn??

yeah why?

you have GOT to clip this

Teresa's eyes return to the stream. Brick is sitting in his chair again, chatting away, gesturing enthusiastically. Nothing out of the ordinary.

And then she sees it.

In the hallway, through the open door.

She jolts back so hard, her chair rolls away from the desk. She has to laugh at herself then, though her heart is pounding. It just startled her, that's all. A jump scare. She hates those.

She leans back in, squinting at the indistinct figure standing in the doorway behind Brick. He's obviously set this up himself. Clever. It's a cardboard cutout, she'd bet on it. She knows he owns several. Sometimes he'll arrange them in the room behind him and talk to them during his stream. One is Danny DeVito. This figure is too tall for that. Perhaps it's The Rock?

And then it moves.

She doesn't jolt back this time, but her stomach drops. It couldn't be a genuine intruder, right? A housebreaker, caught on camera? A crazed fan who'd tracked him down?

She hasn't been paying attention to what Brick is saying, but she tunes back in now. He is claiming there's a glitch. Saying the figure isn't there in real life, but only on the stream, the screen, the broadcasting software.

Which is impossible unless he set up an elaborate green screen, so he must be in on it. Right? This is a bit. A fake. One of his friends, lurking there, trying to scare the viewers. Brick is only pretending not to see.

Still, Teresa watches, riveted. She gasps aloud when the lights go off. The figure moves forward. Somehow it grows no clearer as it approaches the light of the screen. The face remains a smudge of shadowy pixels, the body a mere silhouette, out of focus and barely distinguishable from the darkness of the room. The figure reaches out a hand toward Brick's back. Does it touch him? It's too hard to see in the gloom, but Brick goes suddenly rigid in his chair, face frozen in an expression of shock.

The stream ends abruptly, which startles Teresa almost as much as the figure appearing. Brick never ends stream without his signature outro: "*Alrighty boys, subscribe to me everywhere and together we'll build this house, brick by brick!*" Weird. She'll want to check the fan server and social media, see what everyone is saying.

But first—

She's done it so many times the actions are muscle memory now. Pulling the footage, cutting it down.

*It's not real*, she thinks, as she picks out a screenshot for the thumbnail. Not a real stranger. Not a real threat. Brick is in on it. If it was real, she wouldn't do this. Of course she wouldn't. That would cross a line. It would be invasive, parasitic, like those people who post clips of strangers getting hurt, trying to profit off someone else's pain.

But it's not real, so this is fine.

She posts the clip.