

# CHANNEL FEAR

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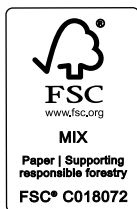
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*For Tom and Dexter*

# PROLOGUE

'HAVE YOU HIT that subscribe button yet? If not, why not?' Zach mock-scowls from my laptop screen, his blue eyes locking on to mine, even though he has no idea that I even exist. Or maybe he does . . . I like to think that he and Lucas have watched our channel. God knows I've put the link in their comments enough times.

Hey Zach and Lucas, love your vids. Check out our ghost hunt channel here!

Hey guys! We're a group of three friends with one of the hottest up-and-coming supernatural investigation channels. Check out our videos on the following link! A shout-out would be great!

Hi there, we just want to say that we're massive fans. You're our biggest inspiration. Check out our paranormal exploration videos on Channel Fear!

‘You need to make that right, right now, people, and hit us up. Come on, guys,’ says a smiling Lucas. He good-naturedly jostles Zach for centre stage, while Zach continues to mock-sowl into the camera, a smile just tweaking at the edges of his perfect mouth. Unable to hold it in any longer, Zach breaks into a grin and swipes a long lock of dark-blond hair from his eyes; hair that is just on the right side of unclean and mussed, and that makes him look like he’s just too cool to care: like Kurt Cobain’s even cuter younger brother.

Correction: made.

*Made* him look like he was too cool to care.

‘What happened to you?’ I say to myself, as I touch the screen, my fingertips brushing over the bright young faces of Zach and Lucas: two of the most successful paranormal vloggers in the UK, with just over three million subscribers.

‘Those of you wonderful, wonderful people who follow our channel will know that we bring you the very best ghost hunt videos,’ continues Zach.

‘*The* best videos out there right now,’ adds Lucas, his cheek piercings accentuating his dimples as he smiles.

‘And that we’re constantly striving to go . . .’

‘. . . where no other ghost hunters dare.’ Lucas narrows his dark eyes for effect as he holds a look to camera, face mock-stern.

‘So, we wanted to share with you folks that we’ve got something a Little. Bit. Extra. Special. for our next series. A location so *haunted*,’ Zach pauses to emphasize the

word ‘haunted’, his beautiful eyes wide and stormy, ‘that we – me and my man Lucas here – are truly terrified.’

‘Yeah, we’re not even joking, guys,’ Lucas cuts in. ‘There are some seriously creepy stories about this place.’

‘And we’re pretty psyched about filming there.’

‘And scared, too, man.’

‘Scared [bleep]-less.’

‘But we’re doing this for YOU lot, because we’re dedicated to bringing you guys the best . . .’

‘. . . the most terrifying . . .’

‘. . . and the most epic videos on the internet.’

Zach mouths ‘Subscribe’ over Lucas’s shoulder, while Lucas does a shoulder-rolling dance move to non-existing music.

‘But to be serious for just a minute,’ says Zach as he shifts closer to the camera, his messily made bed and laptop visible in the background. ‘This place is dark, guys. From what we’ve uncovered, it’s next level [bleep], and not to be messed with, OK?’

‘Yeah, no joke, man,’ says Lucas.

‘And we know that some of you like to go to the places we visit and make your own videos.’ My cheeks flush at this, as they have each and every time I’ve watched – studied – this last uploaded video. ‘And we don’t want any of you guys getting hurt or putting yourselves in danger of any kind. OK?’

‘It’s just not worth it, kids,’ says Lucas in a children’s TV presenter voice, while pointing at the camera with a black-painted fingernail; each finger is adorned with

a wide silver ring. His usually gentle features are stern.

‘We’re doing this so you don’t have to.’

‘Because we’re the professionals,’ adds Lucas.

‘And listen up, if you guys get us up to fifty thousand likes for this teaser video in the next twenty-four hours, before we go, we’ll stay the **WHOLE** weekend at our secret location.’

‘So just hit that “like” button, and we’ll do it.’

‘Anyway, that just about wraps it up for now. Make sure to keep an eye out for the new videos, coming your way, right here on the Zach and Lucas channel.’

‘And remember to grab our merch. Link in the description,’ says Lucas, pointing down with his two index fingers to where **LINK IN THE DESCRIPTION!** in bold white lettering has appeared along the bottom of the screen.

‘And hit us up with a subscribe, dudes.’

‘Do it. You know you want to.’

‘And we will see you on the other side, people.’

‘Peace out.’

I sigh as the screen fades and *The Next Chapter. Coming Soon!!!* flashes up in white gothic lettering against black, teasing a series that never came. Dramatic music starts playing over clips of Zach and Lucas from previous ghost hunts: a shot of them on location in a Scottish castle, gasping and freaking out as a candle flickers, seemingly in response to the question, ‘Is there anyone in the room with us? Make yourself known.’ Now in an abandoned rectory, Zach trying to find Lucas in the dark

twisting corridors, while Lucas's panicked shouts can be heard from somewhere deeper in the building. Next, the two of them running through a dark forest, just the sound of their breath and the whoosh of their legs tearing through the undergrowth, flashes of trees and bushes lit by a torch as they flee from some unseen horror.

I pause the video, and I glance at the date it was uploaded: 29 October last year. Two days later, Zach Cooper and Lucas Yeun disappeared. They didn't tell anyone where they were going. The police search turned up nothing. Tips led to dead ends.

They just vanished off the face of the earth. Breaking my heart.

I had tickets to their meet-and-greet event that November. Now I'll never get to meet them. To meet *him*.

Zach.

I sigh, heavy and hard, and I shift my laptop off my crossed legs and on to the rumpled sheets beside me. Immediately, I miss the heat of it. A heat I didn't even register until it was gone. I flop back, my curls – pine-appled on top of my head in a high, loose ponytail, ready for bed – making soft slaps as I land on a pile of printouts of haunted locations in the UK. Reference books, more printouts and notebooks are sprawled all over my bed. Using the printouts as a makeshift pillow, my sandblasted eyes find the map stuck to a corkboard on the wall next to my bed. Pins mark any legitimate-sounding sightings of Zach and Lucas, gleaned from comments on social media sites. String connects the sighting to any abandoned and



‘haunted’ locations in the vicinity.

I notice how dark it’s got, with only my bedside lamp and the laptop screen lighting the room. It’s silent. Early morning silent. I follow criss-crossing lines of red, which lead to the places we’ve already tried – lines that fade into the gloom.

This is hard.

Harder than I thought it would be.

I let my eyes stray around my bedroom to relax them. Other than the sprawling mess of research materials on my bed, the room is trademark neat: white walls, white furniture. Clean. Fresh. Everything in its place. A contrast to the chaotic but cosy craziness that awaits outside my bedroom door, and throughout the rest of the house. My weary eyes settle on my bedside table, where a paperback copy of *The Shining* lies beside a framed photo of me, Byron and Molly. It was taken at a party that Molly talked me and By into going to. Byron and I hate parties. And we hated that party. But I love that photo. Byron is in the middle, and Molly has one arm slung around his shoulder. The camera caught the exact moment after Byron made some dry remark in my ear. I forget what exactly, something about how lame the party was, and his body is leaning in towards me, and our faces are turned to each other and I’m laughing, my face lit up, head thrown back a little, eyes closed, and Byron is gazing right at me, his face all glowing grin. While Molly is face on, smiling her cute smile to the camera, almost as if she’s posing in a different line-up altogether. Next to that is a snap of me

and Byron, taken at Chessington World of Adventures. I'm six, he'd just turned seven. We're standing in front of the big wheel, and we both have huge beaming grins, faces sticky with candy floss, eyes wide and sparkling with sugar and wonder. I smile at the memory of that day: the free, innocent and uncomplicated fun of little kids. Before hormones got in the way.

I curl on to my side, so that I'm looking at the grainy image of Zach's back, caught at an angle in Lucas's camera as they run from something in the woods. I place my palm against the screen. Maybe they found a long-abandoned house so beautiful that they couldn't leave, and they started new lives there. And, when I find them, Zach's eyes will meet mine and he'll fall so in love with me that he'll ask me to stay, too.

'Where are you? Just let me know. Somehow. Anyhow. Give me a sign.'

After a beat, I sigh and click on to our channel. With its seventy-eight subscribers. Our latest video, *Hunting for Zach and Lucas: The Series. Overnight in Lonslow Castle. (GONE WRONG!)* has only 356 views. More than the twenty or thirty or so we used to get, before the *Hunting for Zach and Lucas* series. But still . . . not what I was hoping for when I came up with the idea. And the comments . . .

You suck.

Booooooring!

Losers.

Yet another video of a bunch of idiots running around in the dark and getting freaked out over nothing. Grow up.

Have u got nothing better to do with ur time? This is morbid. They're missing people. Get a life.

What a surprise, they're not there! Again.

I ended the video with a promise that I'd do a lone vigil for one hour at the next location if the video gets a hundred likes. It has nineteen.

I sit up, push the curls that flop forwards from the pineapple out of my eyes and, cross-legged, take a deep, resolute breath.

'This *is* going to pay off,' I say out loud, just to give the words more power.

'I *will* find you.'



# 1

SHOVING MY BACKPACK into the boot of the car, I turn to find my Canon G7 X right up in my face.

‘Jesus, Byron,’ I say, using a hand, palm out in front of me, trying to get him to back up a bit, while I head round to the passenger side. ‘Give me the camera, dude.’

‘So, what makes you so sure this is the one?’ he says a little provocatively, ignoring my request and following me too closely with the camera. He gets like this sometimes: metaphorically pulling my pigtails, to get my attention.

I stop, one arm leaning on the open passenger door. The metal is hot on my bare skin. ‘Byron, just give—’

‘No, come on, Iris,’ he persists, as he comes round in front of me. ‘What makes you think that this is the one, over the fifty wasted journeys—’

‘It’s not fifty. It’s twelve. Stop exaggerating. Twelve locations,’ I say, exasperated. I’m squinting into the sun.

I'm hot and sticky in my T-shirt and jeans, but it's the best outfit for ghost hunting. Shorts result in scraped shins and splinters and scratches.

'And to be fair, they weren't wasted journeys. Not really,' says Molly, from behind me, more because she's really into this ghost stuff than necessarily as a show of solidarity with me. 'We did get some really good stuff at Briarburn Manor,' she adds, as she tries to ram her sleeping bag and cooler in the remaining space in the boot. 'The orbs we caught on camera, remember?'

'Dust particles,' says Byron. The hint of a mischievous smile plays at the corner of his lips, as he keeps his eyes and the camera on me, enjoying both the debunk and annoying me.

'And the taps during the seance.'

'Wooden joists cooling down at night.'

'Byron,' Molly scolds him in her super-sweet way, which no one could ever feel chastised by. 'What about Lonslow Castle, eh? And that creepy voice we all heard.'

'We don't know what we heard,' says Byron, glancing at her briefly. 'The camera didn't pick it up, so we couldn't analyse it. And, anyway, that's not what we went for, was it, huh, Iris?'

I glance between Molly and Byron as they both stare at me, and I let out a sigh.

'So, why this one, Iris?'

'Because,' I begin, looking at Byron, rather than at the camera, right into his eyeliner-darkened eyes, 'I have a feeling.'

‘A *feeling*?’

‘Yes. A *feeling*.’

‘Great. We’re going to end up fodder for the trolls for the sake of a *feeling*.’

‘OK. Look, this will be the last one, I promise,’ I say, my hands clasped in front of me as if I’m praying, my eyes wide and imploring, a pretty-please smile on my lips, as though I’m afraid he’s going to say, *That’s it, I’ve had enough. I’m going home.*

‘You said that last time.’

‘I know,’ I say, realizing that he’s seen right through me. ‘But I mean it this time. I promise. I *double* promise that if we don’t find anything, we’ll go back to the regular exploration videos. No more Zach and Lucas. Done. Over. It’ll be just for us.’

‘But you can’t help yourself.’

‘Byron . . .’

‘Look, Iris, I don’t—’

‘This is the *One*,’ I say, cutting him off, before he can say anything that I don’t want to hear. It’s like he got out of bed on the wrong side this morning. I mean, he can be a bit of a grump, which is sort of his thing and which he usually pulls off rather endearingly, but, come on. So, I smile sweetly in a way that I hope is utterly appealing, and add, ‘Trust me, By. Hmm?’

I imagine Molly rolling her eyes behind me. Or maybe I’m just projecting.

Byron takes a deep breath in and lets it out.

When he doesn’t speak, I say, ‘Look, By, this is all

going to pay off. I promise. We're going to blow up the internet when we find out where Zach and Lucas went. You just need to believe in me.'

His eyes find mine: years of teasing and play-fights and crushes and secrets and promises and hopes and disappointments and wants and denials and comfort and laughter and awkwardness passing between us – a whole lot of history that Molly wasn't a party to and so couldn't possibly understand.

'Look, Iris, I wasn't going to say anything until we got back, but—'

'No. No no no,' I say, in anticipation of what's coming.

He sighs. 'I've decided this is going to be my last video. Like, completely.'

My heart doesn't so much sink as hit the floor, crackling like an egg. 'What? Byron. No. *Completely*? No. You can't . . . *Completely* completely?' I know he's been getting tired of the *Hunting for Zach and Lucas* series. He's uncomfortable with the increasingly negative comments. While all I see is that the views and subscriptions are also increasing. So the news doesn't come as a total shock, but I didn't expect him to quit *completely*. I'm thrown for a moment, the wind knocked out of me. 'I don't . . . I . . . Uh . . . Molly, tell him,' I say, turning to her.

She grimaces – she already knows. Something inside me clenches, knowing that he discussed it with her before me. 'I tried,' she says heavily, and she puts her hands up palms out, as if to say, *Been there, done that*. I know that she loves the explorations, but I can't help wondering if

she'll leave too – I mean, it'll be a bit awkward just the two of us. Where will that leave me and the channel?

*Where will it leave me and Byron?*

Still in disbelief, I turn back to him. 'But you can't leave,' I say. 'I need you. Like totally and utterly need you. Dude. Don't leave me!'

I lean in and give his chin a playful squeeze, attempting to show that I'm only half serious; when, really, it's more like ninety per cent serious. OK, one hundred percent. I *do* need him. I hold him there, my eyes on his. Hoping he'll see through the act and just stay. But when Molly makes the subtlest, softest, politest throat-clearing sound from the back of the car, I'm suddenly self-conscious, and no longer sure how I'm supposed to act and whether this sort of thing is OK. I back up a bit, while Byron's cheeks flush a little and his eyes flick over my shoulder, offering Molly a sheepish smile.

Handing me the Canon, Byron says, 'Look, we'll talk about it when we get back.'

'So, there's room for discussion . . .'

*He won't leave.*

*Will he?*

*Oh god. He can't.*

Byron shakes his head, sighs and, breaking into a wry smile, he says, 'Just get in the bloody car, idiot.' And he boops me on the nose, like he does when he's trying to cheer me up.

'But . . .'

'Car.'



Leaving me to swallow down my frustration and disappointment, Byron strides round the front of the car on long, slender legs. He pauses to bend down and kiss Molly on the lips when she comes round to his side of the car. She's a little stiff, after #chingate, but Byron does this little nose to nose thing, which is a bit nauseating but which makes her laugh coyly. And they're OK again. I stand by the passenger side, pretending to do something on my camera, but, really, I'm battling with the *Why would I care? I don't think of him that way. I'm happy for him. For the both of them. Really, I am* thing that strikes me in such situations, and that causes my cheeks to flush. Molly catches my eye and offers me one of her brightest olive-branch smiles across the roof of the car, before climbing into the back seat, behind Byron. And we're OK. She knows we have to be.

I'm the Best Friend.

I've been around since, like, *forever*.

And I always will be.

He was mine first.

I slide into the passenger seat, the fabric hot beneath me. Giving up riding shotgun really smarted when those two started going out with each other. I was displaced. Demoted. No one likes that. But I suggested I take the passenger seat for this trip because it's easier for me to film both inside the car and out of the windscreen. Molly couldn't really argue – not that she ever does, as she's too sweet and worried about hurting people's feelings – without looking like a dick and turning it into a big deal. (If

roles were reversed and it were me, I would argue. I don't care about looking like a dick if the outcome is worth it.)

Molly's a people person. I am not. She has a massive, selfless heart. While mine is a bit gristly and sinewy and takes a while, on a low heat, to get tender.

'A *feeling*,' muses Byron from beside me, as he slides the key into the ignition. 'A bloody wild goose chase, more like it,' he grumbles. His lips tighten as I catch his eye, as if he's trying not to smile.

'Byron, there is such a thing as a sixth sense,' says Molly, as she wedges herself between the seats, her elfin chin resting on his shoulder. Looking at him with her big, round eyes, she slides an arm through and gives him a one-armed hug. I grit my teeth. 'Sometimes people just know stuff.'

'It's called coincidence, Moll,' says Byron, glancing back at her. 'Things sometimes connect in unexpected ways,' he continues smugly. 'And most of the time, they do not.'

Molly shakes her head as she shifts back in her seat, but she's smiling, and I know she's thinking sweet, generous thoughts of *Let it go. Just let it go.*

'A *feeling* . . .' Byron mutters.

'By, you're getting boring,' I say. But then, to lighten the mood, and to show that I don't really think he's boring, I playfully pinch his side with my thumb and forefinger (a little harder than necessary as I'm still a little gutted about his announcement). He laughs, though he's trying not to, and flinches, and says, 'Oi!' and flashes me

a playful warning look from beneath his dyed-green fringe. I giggle as he sticks his tongue out at me. ‘None of that,’ he says, feigning seriousness, before turning back to the wheel.

‘You guys,’ says Molly, mock-chiding us. She’s smiling and doe-eyed, but I sense the underlying awkwardness.

Ugh, it’s just so natural for me and By to play-fight and be all touchy-feely. We’ve grown up like that. I keep forgetting to modify my behaviour now that I have to share him with her.

*Note to self: must be on best behaviour.*

‘I’m just pointing out that I’d rather have something a bit stronger than a feeling to go on. You know, like evidence. Facts. Figures,’ continues Byron.

‘Well, it’s a strong feeling,’ I offer tentatively.

Byron snorts with reluctant laughter. And he starts the engine.