

# THE REVIVED

by Peter Szabo



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## Chapter One

I'M TRAPPED.

The TV interviewer turns from Mum to me.

"Can I talk to your son?" he says over his shoulder.

"He's twenty," Mum says. "You don't need my permission."

The interviewer steps across the gravel path toward me, then turns to the camera operator and says, "Follow."

I've been getting sucked into Mum's media whirlpool for as long as I can remember, but I still tense up as the interviewer locks onto me through his rimless glasses.

I look around, desperate for a reason to move away. Talking about Mum is my least favorite thing. Her brilliant music and ever-so-perfect life—not! What could people want to know about Mandy Reeves that they haven't already learned from twenty-five years of interviews and articles? Such a fucked-up culture of celebrity where people imagine they actually know a pop star. I know her. Surprise, she's not that interesting. And she's been a candidate for the Worst Mum of the Year since her first single topped the charts.

As if a famous Australian singer wasn't enough for the tabloids, now there's this nonsense about her waking from a coma along with a bunch of other famous people—the Revived, they call them. They all get knocked into comas for a month by some freaky voices, and then they wake up preaching about peace and hope. It's got people

all wound up about Mum for new reasons. If it bleeds, it leads, and born-again pop stars must be bloody.

A few minutes ago, I was minding my own business and impatiently waiting for Mum to finish so we could get to the estate lawyer's office. Now I can't escape. Wish I'd smoked some weed or had a beer.

The interviewer stops in front of me, his cologne wafting like poisonous gas. "Hey, Hutch. Mind if we chat for a moment about your mum?"

"Well, we're running late for an appointment, so..."

"This won't take long," he interjects. "I promise."

I don't want to cause a scene, so I shrug. But I won't make it easy for him.

"We were just chatting about how her coma has affected her career. She said this business with the Revived is her new calling and she's not planning to write any new music." The drama king gasps as if someone told him about another terrorist attack in Manhattan. "What do you think about that?"

I shrug again. "It's her life. Her fans will get over it. There's lots of other pop music for them."

The interviewer smiles as if being teased. "Now, now."

Mum joins us, sitting beside me on the bench and smiling. The same spacey smile that all the Revived wear. It's as if she's not quite in the real world. Still, I don't object to her sitting close and sparing some attention for me.

"Hey, here's an idea," the interviewer says to Mum. "Why not write political songs? One of your fellow Revived spoke about the troubling leadership on our planet who should"—he checks some notes on his phone—"accept responsibility for the downfall of all living things.' You could write a protest song like our local boy, John Butler, or even Bob Dylan."

"For now, we're all working together to share our message," Mum says. "That's keeping me busy, and that's why I agreed to this interview."

"And I appreciate it, truly. It's not every day I get to chat with an

international megastar.”

He thinks for a moment, and then his eyes light up.

“How about a fairy-tale song? Get it?” he winks. “They called your coma the Sleeping Beauty Curse.”

She smiles blandly and shakes her flowing blond curls for maximum photo-op effect. Must be residue from the pop princess who transformed overnight—literally—into one of the new spiritual gurus.

“That’s a little on the nose, don’t you think?” I mumble.

My phone bings. Thank God for the interruption. I look at the screen, deliberately snubbing the interviewer. Sylvia texts:

I found some apartments to rent.

Glad she’s helping me look for a place. I’m dying to get out of the house. It’s only Mum’s money that keeps me hanging around. That’s why I’m eager to collect my inheritance today, so I can break free of Mum’s financial shackles. Plus, the worship given to these rich-and-famous tossers with their message from God makes living with Mum almost intolerable.

Who knows? Maybe we can have an actual mother-son relationship when I’m living on my own. I text back:

Show me pics later. Be there soon.

Sylvia’s a pretty good sheila. She has the patience to poke around the Internet to hunt for an apartment, searching through shitty pictures and bloated descriptions of dingy dives and dark holes. She texts:

We still clubbing later?

Yup.

Shit, the interviewer is still prattling on. This is taking way longer than I agreed to. It took weeks to find time in her schedule to meet the lawyer so I can access my trust fund.

I wipe a pool of sweat from my forehead. It's bloody hot! And I deliberately sat in the shade of one of the few trees in front of Melbourne's Royal Exhibition Building. All these beautiful gardens and they couldn't add more trees?

The interviewer has the balls to sit beside me. I stifle a gag when his body heat mixes with his cologne. He crosses his legs as if he's settling in for a chat over beers at the pub. He moves the microphone closer to me with a very hairy hand. Like, gorilla hairy.

"So, if Mum's not making music, what do you think about her being our local spokesperson for the Revived?"

I slide a couple of inches away from him, which pushes me closer to Mum. I glance at Mum, who smiles encouragingly.

"Don't really buy it," I say. "But I'm not that interested in politics. Pretty boring stuff."

He nods and his face gets serious.

"That's fair. Not everyone understands how the world's economy works..."

"Which is why we need to help people understand," Mum interrupts.

I roll my eyes. Here we go again.

"There are plenty of powerful people who want to take advantage of that ignorance," she says. "They don't simplify their ideas or the economic process."

"But surely we can't solve all the world's problems with a peace sign and some affirmations," he says.

"Mr. Yates," Mum says with more patience than I will ever have, "reducing our message to trivial sound bites isn't helping. You're smarter than that and should use your position to advocate clearly for education and a fair distribution of wealth."

His head bobs up and down. "Fair point, Mandy."

He turns to me. "But where were we, Hutch? I'm looking for a human angle to your mum's situation."

Shit, I thought I was off the hook.

He pauses, as if thinking of some other way to trick me into playing his game. “Let’s talk about when she was in her coma. Were you worried about her?”

I frown. “Uh, it’s not like I could do anything about it. She had doctors and others to take care of her. And it wasn’t much different from when she was away on tour.”

That probably came off cold. Truthfully? I thought she was going to die, and I’d be alone for good. But the Voice in My Mind, my new friend VIM, as I call it, was some comfort.

“And what about the aliens?” he asks. “Doesn’t that kinda worry you . . . that aliens got inside your mum’s brain?”

I scoff. “You’ve been watching too much Sci-Fi. Check your facts, mate. None of the Revived has mentioned aliens.”

Is it weird that someone transmitted an elaborate plan to preach love and goodness into fifty people’s brains? Sure. But aliens? More likely caused by a conspiracy of religious scientists. Or maybe it’s a mysterious villain controlling minds from an island in the Maldives.

Dad would have had a physicist explanation to shut down these sci-fi nerds. I wish he were around to bring common sense to this chaos.

“Ouch.” The interviewer pouts and shakes his head. He glances at Mum, who looks impassive yet poised in her prim and proper dress. Then he’s back on me. “You’re a hard case, kid. This is your mother we’re talking about. Something very supernatural happened to fifty people all over the world, and now the whole planet is divided over whether they’re prophets or pranksters. And you have no concern for your mum?”

I glance at Mum and feel something like regret. Am I being too much of a prick? She has been more attentive since the coma. But it’s hard to trust her after all the years she valued her precious fans over me. Especially after Dad died.

But I will not open up about my family troubles to this clown. Instead, I respond with my default shrug and look down at my sneakers.

“All right. We get it. Gotta be cool for the cameras.” The interviewer’s tone shifts from playful to serious as he leans out to look over me at Mum. “In the past couple of days, some of the Revived have gone missing. Are you scared, Mandy?”

“Well, I am concerned, but not just for the Revived. We knew our platform for global collaboration would cause a lot of disruption. Big businesses will have to be accountable for their greed, and everyone will need to take responsibility and make sacrifices to turn things around. And there’s not much time . . .”

“But are you scared?” he persists.

Mum looks at me with a trace of warmth and maybe sadness in her smile. She rests her hand on my arm, and I’m shocked that it feels comforting.

“Not for myself,” she says.

The interviewer looks at me, and his face softens. He turns to the camera and smiles as if he’s nailed a Pulitzer nomination.

“And you, Hutch?” He’s back with me. “Does this new threat stir your heart with a bit of concern?”

I scratch my head, and my face contorts. Does internal squirming show on a public video recording? I haven’t a clue what he’s talking about. I’ve been avoiding news about the Revived. It’s all too airy-fairy. Like a new freakin’ religion.

“I don’t know,” I say. “It’s not like I want my Mum to get hurt. I’ve already lost my dad, and I’m not a complete fuckup.”

The interviewer raises his eyebrows. “Well, that’s a relief. So . . .”

And that’s it. I wish I hadn’t mentioned Dad. And I don’t want to talk about Mum anymore. Not about her career or her cult.

I stand up abruptly and check the time on my phone. “Great! The lawyer’s office is closed now, Mum.”

I stride away. The interviewer lobs a barely discernible parting insult. “Well, you may not be a complete fuckup, but there’s a

healthy dose of one there.”

“I’m sorry, Hutch,” Mum says.

There’s a twinge of shame at my pushing her away, but I dismiss it quickly. Mum can take it. She’s used to worse attacks on her celebrity image. She even spun Dad’s death into plenty of sympathy, which boosted radio play and sales for her music.

“Hutch, wait,” she calls after me.

Screw it. I won’t go back with my tail between my legs. She didn’t even try to stop the interview so we could leave on time.

“It’s too late,” I shout over my shoulder. “I’ll get my trust money another time.”

Goddamn, she’s still got me tied to her. Why can’t life be simple?

I turn and glance at the reporter and his camera guy walking away. Now Mum’s talking to some bloke in a suit outside a long black limo. She looks in my direction and calls out, but I can’t quite hear all the words.

“Hutch . . .” Something. “Love you . . .” And I think, “I’ll be all right.”

Kinda weird. Why is she trying to reassure me when she’s only going to another appointment?

Then she reaches out. Not a wave and not a come-join-me beckoning. It’s kinda like she’s reaching out to . . . what? Say goodbye? A twinge of concern slips through my heart.

But the tall dude is helping her into the car, so . . . just another press thing, I guess.

I pull out my phone and order an Uber.

## Chapter Two

“I WANT TO DANCE FOREVER!” Sylvia shouts over the throb of electronic music at New Guernica, our usual nightclub escape.

I sway on the dance floor, letting the music add its own intoxicating influence to the psilocybin that electrifies my brain.

A cocoon of bliss. Magic mushrooms, alcohol, laughing, dancing; this is all I want. Everything else disappears.

Sylvia raises her spidery arms into the air and rolls her torso to the beat.

Then something changes. I’m suddenly overwhelmed with heaviness in my legs. The mushrooms are really kicking in.

“I can’t stand anymore.”

Sylvia looks concerned. “You don’t like the music?”

“No, my legs. I literally can’t stand anymore.”

I also can’t wait for her to comprehend. Feeling as if I’m about to collapse on the floor in a tangle of limbs, I lurch over to a purple couch and plop into its infinite softness. A small defeat over gravity.

I carefully pick up my ginger and lime drink. I slowly savor it. The icy carbonation feels as if it’s burning off a layer from inside my throat. But in a good way.

I watch Sylvia groove out on the dance floor, drifting in and out of view within a sea of elastic bodies.

Now my leg is vibrating. I feel a hard implant in my thigh. I reach into my pocket. Whew, it’s my phone. I take it out. Mum’s number is on the screen, and below it is the text sent two hours ago.

Are you OK?

Am I okay?

A vivid movie plays out in my head, starting with a memory of the park earlier today. The black limo. The tall dude. Mum reaching out to me.

Then memory morphs into imagination. A woman in sunglasses with an umbrella standing at the side of a road watching the limo drive into a lake. Mum's panicked face pressed up against the back window as the car slips underwater. Banging on the window with her fist. Her eyes wide and desperate.

The woman on the road wears a black skirt and black heels. She smiles while Mum drowns.

Memories again. Like photographs. The canyon at Plenty Gorge Park where Dad died. A sunset illuminating the scraggly bushes and hard earth with golden light. Dad's soul disintegrating like dust motes in the fading daylight.

How could he just die? No suicide note. No witnesses. Just a crumpled body and his broken light-meter equipment at the bottom of the canyon. He wasn't climbing Everest. It was a damn state park where thousands of people jog, hike, and camp year-round.

Memories turn into mental meanderings. After he died, it was only Mum and me. We weren't close before Dad died, and then we grew farther apart. She was always busy with recording and tours and media stuff.

Dad said she was around more when I was young, but I don't remember. Any time I remember us together, she was on the phone, answering emails, or meeting with a business partner, her assistant, or some adult that would distract her. Dad was busy with his physics research, too, but somehow, he made time to hang out with me. Said it gave his brain a rest.

With Mum, someone or something else always seemed more

important than me.

But she's Mum. And I remember what that fucking interviewer said about some of the Revived going missing. And the messed-up fantasy of Mum drowning in the limo loops like the JFK Zapruder film. Damn. My child-self rises from a dark hole inside, crying for attention.

What if Mum disappeared for real? Or was killed?

Though I avoid reading a lot about the Revived, I've occasionally seen headlines from conspiracy nuts. Maybe there is a plot to take them out. And maybe Mandy Reeves is on the list. There's a big hollow space where Dad used to be (he'd say that "space" was filled with all sorts of quantum particles).

What if I'm left alone with both Mum and Dad rotting in the ground? Would that space open and swallow me down?

Is Mum okay? In a coma again? What the hell do those not-aliens want to say this time? And why can't they just talk to her when she's awake?

*We can*, a distinct voice says in my head, startling me and distorting my own mental chatter and the ambient music. Fucking Voice in my Mind again. I wish it would warn me before it hijacks my brain. I strain to declutter my mind of the muddled memories and shroom effects and focus on VIM.

It's been weeks since I last heard VIM, when Mum was in her coma. It mentioned the Revived, as if it were predicting the future, which is completely bonkers. Call it denial, but I decided VIM was a harmless way for my mind to distract me during the stress of Mum's illness. Dad would have used some technobabble to help me figure out what the hell it was. Even though I wouldn't have understood him, it would have comforted me to believe his explanation was based in science, not a paranormal mystery.

Everyone won't shut up about the Revived and how they will either save humanity from itself or divert us all toward epic mass suicide. And it scares the shit out of most people, but also inspires

the New Agers and religious freaks with a renewed purpose.

I lean toward the scared-shitless side. I don't know how to process that magnitude of fear. Thank whatever gods are out there for drugs and alcohol.

But here's VIM again, like a mold stain leaking through a poor paint job on the ceiling.

*All right, I say in my head. Who the hell are you?*

*I'm gobsmacked when I hear, A friend who wants to help.*

*I test a new idea. Is that you, Dad?*

No answer. I'd be shocked if I had received a reply and would worry I was suffering from a mental health problem. Jesus, that's all I need—to join Mum in the psychiatrist's office. Maybe we could get a two-for-one rate.

Suddenly, I feel the couch sink beside me, and Sylvia sits down. I pull my attention to the outside world. Sylvia snakes her arms around me, melting into the folds of my body. I recline deeper, enjoying the press of her warm body.

"How did it go with the lawyer?" she murmurs. "Are you rich now?"

The memory of this afternoon carves a path through my bliss like a dark tentacle.

"Never happened. Mum's interview went too long, and the office was closed."

I upend my drink into my mouth and finish the last soothing gulp.

"Oh." Sylvia decompresses, and I wonder if she'll melt into the cracks between the couch cushions.

"Sorry, Syl. I'm pretty ticked off about it."

"What am I gonna do about Trent?" She sounds like a ten-year-old.

"We'll figure it out. I'll get my inheritance next week and pay him then."

She's too quiet. Not a good thing when she's high. Means she's crashing.

The phone vibrates in my hand. I raise it in front of my face and see a new text message. Unknown number.

Who figured out a number that doesn't exist? What a brilliant discovery! Was it the highest number ever? Or a new number that wasn't 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, or 9?

"Who's unknown?" Sylvia asks, her voice blending with the music like a surreal vocal track.

"That's deep, Syl. Aren't we all unknown? And also, none of us?"

Sylvia kisses my cheek. Like, twenty times in a row. Then she burrows her head deeper into my neck like a large cat looking for comfort.

"Thank you for, you know, being here," she murmurs. "I love you. And your smell."

"My smell kinda likes you, too."

Sylvia chuckles, her breath heating the skin on my neck.

And then I notice my bladder is full. "I have to piss."

"Take me with you," she says.

I consider this and decide it's not an option. "I think I can manage on my own. Want something?"

"Jäger-bombs," she purrs.

I slide out from under Sylvia, slowly stand on legs with questionable muscle control, and shuffle across the dance floor to the other side of the club.

The bathroom is refreshingly quiet, with only a distant throb of a beat moving through the physical barriers between the dance floor and me. I lapse quickly into a meditative state while voiding my bladder.

*There's more going on than you realize, VIM says.*

I glance over at the tall, brooding emo at the neighboring urinal. Emo's eyes are closed, and he appears to be uncommunicative.

*Like what?* I ask silently.

*Your mother and the Revived are in danger.*

"Shit, leave me alone," I say reflexively out loud.

“Whatever you want, mate,” Emo says as he flushes and turns away.

I frown, embarrassed.

“Sorry,” I mutter, then a zip, a flush, and a stumble to wash my hands at the sink.

What the hell do I do if Mum’s in danger? I imagine Mum’s broken body lying beside Dad’s at the bottom of a gully, obscured by bushes. Both with eyes wide open, seeing nothing on this side and everything on the other. Flies crawling across their misty eyeballs and into their nostrils.

Bad enough that Dad is dead. What’s the threat to Mum?

I wash my hands and return to the physical world. The music creeps back into my awareness and pulls at me like a string of melted cheese on a fork.

Fuck it. This is way too complicated, and Mum is probably fine. Tunes and booze and Sylvia’s cat-snuggles call to me.

I order three Jäger-bombs at the bar and drink one right away. Life is good again.

I walk carefully back to the couch, trying not to spill the custom plastic bowls of spiced cherry goodness.

Someone’s sitting beside Sylvia. Fuck!

“Hutch, my man,” Trent says. “You didn’t have to buy me a drink.”

Sylvia’s eyes are wide, almost stretching toward me for rescue.

I offer a drink to Sylvia, and she slurps it up instantly.

Trent accepts the other shot and tosses it back, smacking his lips. “I was just asking your girl here about our arrangement. Then you came along before she could tell me when she’ll pay up.”

He smiles at Sylvia, but there’s a mean glare in his eyes.

“What’s the damage?” I ask.

“Only five k. Pocket change for the son of a rock star.”

Goddamn it. I don’t have that much right now, which means I’d

have to ask Mum for a loan. I'd rather eat broken glass than beg for money from Mum. She'd be all sweet and cheery about it, but I'd feel castrated.

Shit, this dude can be nasty, though. I don't want him to hurt Sylvia. Or worse.

Talk about a buzzkill.

Trent pats Sylvia's head. She shrinks away, but not enough to disengage completely. Gotta play it easy with this bloke. He might have a knife or worse.

"Look, I can get the money," I say. "I've got some coming to me by Tuesday. I can grab 500 at the ATM right now."

Trent stares at me with a slight smile. I tense, wondering if he's going to explode and put a hole in me or slam a fist into Sylvia's pretty face.

"Sure," he says, as if I've asked if he wants another Jäger-bomb.

"Cool. I'll be back in a few."

Sylvia moves to stand up and join me.

"Not you, lovey," Trent says while grasping her arm. "Let's keep the couch warm for your boyfriend until he comes back."

She flicks her eyes between Trent and me.

"It's all right, Syl. I'll be quick."

That's exactly my intention as I stroll to the ATM beside the bar.

I'm waiting for the machine to process the transaction and spit out the bills when my phone buzzes again.

Another text message from the unknown number.

That was quite the performance in your interview.

Shit, is the interview already online? I was such an ass with that ridiculous interviewer. Goddamn media fuckers!

Screw it. I've got other things to handle right now.

I return to the couch and hold out the bills. Trent reaches for

them, and I pull them back.

“I know you’re a busy guy,” I say. “Don’t you have other places to be?”

Trent chuckles and stands. I extend my hand, and he takes the bills.

“Tuesday then?” he asks.

“For sure.”

He turns and blows a kiss to Sylvia. “We’re square for now, right, luv?”

She manages a weak smile and a nod.

“Later, Hutch,” he says.

And he’s gone.

“The shroom trip is all ruined,” Sylvia says, “and I wanna go home.”

We walk to the exit, where I order an Uber.

“Um, what if you can’t get the money on Tuesday?” she asks with a shaky voice. “Can you, like, maybe ask your mum for a loan?”

I give her an icy stare. “No fucking way.”

“But...”

“Don’t you get it?” I shout. “I’m already Mummy’s toy. I want to be my own person!”

Sylvia’s face locks as if she’s had a stroke. Then her mouth pouts and tears well up in her eyes. At least she hasn’t had a stroke.

I turn away quickly. “Shit, I wish she had never come out of that goddamn coma. Then I could do whatever the fuck I want.”

My phone buzzes. The damn unknown number.

“I have something to take care of,” I say, forcing some calm into my voice. “You can take the Uber. I’ll call tomorrow.”

As if on cue, the car pulls up, and I open the back door for Sylvia.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I fucked up and don’t know how to fix it.”

“Get some rest. We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

I close the car door, and my phone buzzes again.

A shred of childlike guilt pokes up through the thick resentment.

Guilt over how I blew up at Sylvia. And what I said about Mum never waking from the coma.

Would I really want that?

No.

I walk down the street and see water drops on the phone screen as I read the text.

Your mother is gone.



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