

Chapter 4

David opens his eyes. He reaches for his phone. He holds it at arm's length. He hits Record. He says: *Good morning, guys*. He hits send. He scrolls through the comments below last night's video. He posts some replies. He answers some messages. He watches a video someone has sent him. He watches a few snippets of pornography. He skims over a couple of news headlines. He flicks through some photos of women he might date. He flicks through some photos of trainers he might buy. He reads some fresh comments below his 'good morning, guys' video. He posts some replies. He holds up his phone and takes a picture of his face. He edits it, using his thumb to smooth out the lines across his forehead, lightening the bags under his eyes, before applying a filter so that it looks like it was taken on an instant camera in the early Seventies. Then he posts it. He writes a comment: *Still in bed, guys*. He writes another comment: *Living the dream*. He watches a video. He takes a photo. He reads a comment. He sends a message. He takes a photo...

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Four hours later, David is in a taxi on his way to see his friend Nadeem, a fellow video star who also happens to be one of Sarah's clients. As an ex-chef, Nadeem initially found his niche making recipe videos, though over the last six months he's started performing food related stunts and

extreme eating challenges in an effort to attract more viewers. At Sarah's suggestion, David occasionally appears in Nadeem's videos, something she calls 'cross-pollination'. The last time David featured in one of his videos, he ended up eating a desiccated Thai scorpion on camera – a traumatic event that nevertheless turned out to be one of their biggest shows to date. Today however, Nadeem has promised he will not be required to eat anything weird. Rather, they are just getting together to catch up. Although obviously the whole thing will still be filmed.

As the taxi crawls its way through the city, David continuously films himself with his phone. He asks his viewers what they think of his hair and his outfit. He asks his viewers to describe their *craziest taxi journey ever*. He asks the taxi driver if he'd like to be in one of his videos. The taxi driver doesn't understand what he's talking about. He tells David to stop jumping around and put his seatbelt on. David opens the window, enjoying the early spring sunshine on his face. He squints up at the sky. If he tilts his head at the right angle, he is able to block out the chain stores and power lines, so that the only thing in his field of vision is the cloudless blue above. I could be anywhere, he thinks to himself. Barcelona. Barbados. Bali. *It's all the same sky*. It feels profound. He reaches for his phone and points it up. Somehow it looks even bluer on the screen. Even realer. He takes a photo. He crops it, applies a filter. He writes a comment: *It's all the same sky, guys...*

He hits Send.

A little way down the road, he spots a small cabal of teenage girls eating chips at a bus stop, their bulky bags stuffed with school blazers. Occasionally the girls laugh, or chuck a chip to one of the moth-eaten pigeons that congregate around their ankles. Mostly though they ignore each other and stare at their phones.

As the taxi draws nearer, David is vaguely embarrassed to find he is hoping one of them will recognise him. This is something that still happens fairly regularly, though not perhaps quite as regularly as it once did. He still remembers the first time somebody stopped him in the street, back when he was a fresh-faced twenty-two-year-old. At the time he'd only been making videos for a few months, and while he'd quickly found an audience, he was nevertheless fairly sceptical at the prospect of turning his hobby into a full-time career. As a result, he was still working a full-time job, fielding calls for a home insurance company. He was on his lunch break when it happened. A girl no older than seventeen approached him while he was walking to the local deli with a couple of co-workers.

'I just want to tell you how much I like your show,' she said, her eyes on the floor, her cheeks flushing with an awkward smile, her hair a halo in the midday sun. And then she was gone.

Even now, three years later, he can still recall the visceral thrill of that encounter. The disbelief that this complete stranger could possibly know who he was. That she had not only watched but *liked* his show. Up until that point,

he'd not even thought of it as a 'show' as such. The videos had only ever really felt like a one-sided conversation. A way to wind down the hours between finishing work and going to sleep. And sure, he'd noticed the views and enjoyed the warm rush as the likes and comments rolled in. But even then, it felt more like a game than something rooted in reality. A way of scoring points. Of getting to the next level. Sitting alone in his bedroom, rambling into his laptop or phone, it had honestly never occurred to him that there were real people sitting out there on the other side of the camera. People who were listening to what he had to say. Who actually *cared* about what he was planning to wear the next day, or who his top three favourite rappers were, or whether he could distinguish between various brands of smoothies in a blind taste test. He certainly never dreamed that he was famous enough to be recognised and approached on the street while he was on his lunch break.

And so when that girl came up to him, it was a revelation. It was like a lightbulb exploding in his mind. Every single one of those numbers on the view counter was a real person. And there were thousands of them. Tens of thousands, even then. And they were all watching him. Listening to him. It was as though he'd discovered a portal into each and every one of their lives, directly from his computer to theirs. It was like magic. And who knew? With that many people watching, it might just be a chance to shed his suit and tie and become the person he always knew he was born to be. Someone different. Someone special.

Someone famous.

As for his colleagues, once the girl had left they looked at him differently. They stared at him like he was some sort of God. All the way to the deli, they peppered him with questions about his videos, asking how he got into it, how much money he was making. One of them actually ended up buying his lunch for him. It was insane. To them, he was a bona fide star.

He went back to the office and handed his resignation in that same day.

By now the taxi has drawn level with the teenage girls. They are still all staring resolutely at their phones, oblivious to anything else around them. David winds the window down all the way and leans out slightly, so he is facing them head on.

Nothing.

He clears his throat, though the noise is lost under the growl of the car's engine.

Still nothing.

Then, finally, one of the girls glances up. She is no more than ten feet away.

Their eyes meet. A spark of something. Maybe? And then...

Nothing.

She looks away. Back to her chips. Her phone. She has no idea who he is.

David rolls up the window. He tells himself it doesn't mean anything. That he shouldn't worry. That this is *definitely* not a sign his star is waning.

That this is not the beginning of the end.

He takes out his phone. He hits Record. He asks his viewers what they think of his new trainers. He asks the viewers to name their top three favourite music videos of all time. He asks the viewers to send him love and hugs.

In the front seat, the taxi driver sighs.

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Nadeem is midway through shaving when he answers the door, topless with a towel wrapped around his waist, his upper lip still slathered in a froth of white foam.

'Oh. My. *God*,' he says, pulling David into his apartment and wafting him towards the kitchen. 'I'm so hungover I think I might die. As in literally die.'

'What happened? I thought you were doing that juice detox thing? The Green Sixteen?'

'Oh, I was. And it was going so well, too. It's just that Mike called and asked if I was free to go for one quiet drink and I've only just got back in.'

'You stayed over at Mike's? But what about Chris?'

Nadeem winces. 'Chris was... away? I know, I know! Don't judge me. I can't deal with anything except coffee right now.'

'You're a bad man, Mr Begum.'

'Ugh, I told you, no judging. Just make me coffee, dammit. And make it strong. I need something to mask the taste of shame.'

While Nadeem disappears to finish getting ready, David heads for the kitchen. In most respects, the loft-style apartment is almost identical to his own extortionately priced pad. Open-plan. Minimally furnished. Exposed beams and brickwork. It is both highly stylised and completely impersonal. The only significant difference between the two apartments is the professional kitchen where Nadeem now films the majority of his videos, ever since migrating from his Manchester bedsit eighteen months earlier when his show took off. Like David, it is the videos that pay for Nadeem's apartment. The videos pay for everything.

The coffee machine, like most things in the kitchen, is ridiculously over-engineered; a space-age artefact studded with a dashboard of dials and levers. As David struggles to work out where the water goes in, he spots a proof copy of Nadeem's latest recipe book lying on the stainless steel countertop and feels a pang of jealousy. While Nadeem isn't yet anywhere close to eclipsing his own viewing figures, he has nevertheless begun to, as Sarah puts it, *diversify his offering*. Like most other single interest stars

– the crafters, the yoga instructors, the singing coaches – Nadeem’s videos seem to exist as a leap pad onto bigger and brighter things. To courses and classes and product tie-ins. In addition to the cookery books, just last month Nadeem brought out a range of branded juicers. There have even been whispers about him opening a restaurant in the near future. Either way, it seems his friend is already well positioned for the inevitable day when the well dries up and the video money stops rolling in.

‘Why can I smell failure instead of coffee?’

David looks up to see Nadeem fully dressed, his phone in his hand.

‘Are you filming me?’

‘Affirmative, Captain. So I take it you never went to barista school, huh?’

Immediately David snaps into his on-screen persona. His voice a little louder. His gestures a little larger.

‘Well if you didn’t have such a *ridiculous* coffee machine I’d probably be finished by now. What’s wrong with good old Nescafé, huh?’

Nadeem stops filming, lowering his phone for a second. ‘Fuck!’

‘What? What’s wrong?’

'I was given that machine for free last week,' Nadeem pouts. 'I'm supposed to be promoting it. I'm, like, their brand ambassador or something.'

'Shit, sorry man. My bad.'

'It's cool. I'll edit it out later. Anyway, how are you? How did the thing go yesterday? The big interview. It was the OptimiZer guy, right? Xan something?'

'Brinkley.'

'That's it. Man those bands are so cool. I really want to get one.'

'What for? It's not like you have a boss.'

'I don't know. They just look awesome. Besides, maybe Sarah could use them to track us? Check we're being productive little video-makers,' he laughs. 'So how was the mysterious Mr Brinkley? Is he as hot in real life as he is on the front of *Time* magazine?'

'He was a bit weird, actually. The whole thing was a bit weird.'

'Weird how? Like endearingly eccentric weird or creepy child killer weird?'

David shrugs. 'Somewhere in between? He invited me and Sarah there to do an interview, but then when we got there it was like he wanted to interview me. He says he wants me to make a show with him.'

Nadeem blinks a couple of times, a strange look briefly crossing his face, before he breaks out into a large smile.

'A show? That's... that's amazing. Congratulations! I didn't know he was making content now? What is it? An advert?'

'No, not really. It was more like... I don't know. Like I said, it was weird.'

'What? That's it? You can't drop that bombshell and then just clam up. I need details. Have you started filming already? You did accept his offer I presume?'

'No. Yes. No... I mean, I don't know yet. Obviously Sarah thinks it's the greatest opportunity ever. It's just... You know what, I've just remembered I'm not actually supposed to be talking about this. I signed a bunch of things which I think mean he can legally have me executed if I so much as mention his name.'

'Wow. Really? You're shutting me out like that? Well excuse me for being interested, Mr Big Time.'

'Don't be like that. You weren't even supposed to know I was meeting him. Anyway, are you going to tell me what we're doing here today? For the love of God please don't tell me I'm going to be eating any invertebrates.'

'Are you kidding? I'm far too hungover for anything that elaborate. I need comfort food. Oh shit, I just need to check, you're not still on your vegan thing are you?'

'Nah, I'm full Paleo now.'

'Okay, perfect.' Nadeem cocks his phone again. 'You ready?'

David nods, fixing his smile.

'So, Doctor D, I've *cooked* up something a little special for us today. It's called the Chicken Nugget Challenge.'

'Chicken nuggets? That doesn't sound too bad. Normally you've got me eating live baby octopuses by now.'

'Yeah, I thought you deserved a break. And everyone likes nuggets, right?'

'I know I do.'

'Great! In that case there's just one thing we need before we get started...'

Nadeem stands up and goes out of the room, still filming. Seconds later he returns, carrying a cage in his free hand. Inside the cage is a live chicken.

'David,' he says. 'I'd like you to meet your lunch.'

Nadeem zooms in so that David's face fills the phone's screen, his jaw hanging open, his eyebrows raised in exaggerated surprise.

'You have got to be kidding me?'