

Chapter 5

For the next hour or so, David and Nadeem goof around with the chicken. Despite his assertion that *it's as simple as wringing its neck*, it transpires that Nadeem has never actually slaughtered so much as a mosquito before. As a result, they spend a good portion of their time watching gruesome online instructional videos, clinging to each other and squealing in horror as various Kentucky-fried-farmers offer their tips on pithing, plucking and eviscerating poultry. By the time they've finished watching, they are both several shades paler.

When at last they are ready to do the deed, Nadeem hoists the cage onto the kitchen counter. They both stoop to stare in at the bizarre animal. David has never seen a chicken up close before, and he's startled by how *alive* it looks. He wonders if he might go vegan again after all.

'Okay. So when I open the hatch you grab it quickly,' Nadeem says, holding up his phone to capture the moment of release.

The chicken stares back, its eyes as dull and glassy as the lens of the camera.

'Right then. Three, two, one!'

The moment Nadeem slips open the cage door, the chicken immediately springs forwards, slipping past David's waiting hands.

'Damn! What are you doing?'

'I'm trying! I'm trying!'

After a farcical couple of minutes spent chasing the flapping bird, Nadeem at last manages to recapture it, at which point the pair have a predictable change of heart and grant the chicken an indefinite stay of execution.

'We've come too far with this little fella,' Nadeem explains to the viewers.

'Yeah,' David agrees. 'We've bonded now. We're best friends forever.'

The video ends with the two of them collapsing onto Nadeem's sofa with a box of McDonald's nuggets, while the chicken struts obliviously across the coffee table, leaving a trail of feathers and shit behind it.

Within minutes of posting it online, the views are flooding in. The feedback is overwhelmingly positive. Every thumb is up. People are calling it their best collaboration yet. Sarah messages them both simultaneously: *Great work, guys*. She includes a smiley face.

'Oh sweet,' Nadeem says, cracking the cap from his second celebratory beer, his hangover seeming to recede further with every sip. 'Apparently Amanda's having a house party next weekend. You in?'

'Ah man, next weekend? I'm supposed to be visiting my folks. My dad needs a hand in the garden and I said I'd help out.'

'Well check you out, Mr Son-of-the-Year.'

'Hardly. He guilt-tripped me into it. But I have been pretty rubbish lately. I can't remember the last time I visited them.'

'Ah, I'm sure they understand. You are a hot-shot online megastar after all.'

'Funny.'

'What about this evening then? I could invite some people over? We could shoot another video?'

David glances up from his phone. 'Sorry man. I can't do tonight either. I'm taking Alice out for dinner.'

'Wait, what? As in Alice the girl who's working on your autobiography? Is that even legal?'

'What do you mean?'

'Taking your *ghostwriter* on a date. Don't they have a code of ethics or something?'

'Well first off, it's totally not a date. It's just that our meetings are usually so stuffy I thought maybe we could liven it up with some food and some wine...'

'... And some sex.'

'You are so wrong. I assure you our relationship is one hundred percent professional. Besides, even if I was interested, I'm pretty sure she hates me.'

'Why? What's she said?'

'Ah, it's nothing really. Just a vibe I get. I'm probably being paranoid.'

'Probably. I mean, who could possibly hate someone with a face as cute as yours? Anyway, if you ask me you're still hung up on... Wait, don't tell me... Emma?'

'Ella. And no, I'm not. Ella was crazy. Leaving her was the best decision I've ever made.'

'I don't know what to say, man. You just seem to have a thing for psychopaths.'

David laughs, swallowing down his final nugget. 'I think it's the other way around. They have a thing for me.'

As he gets ready to leave, the two friends take one final selfie together at the door, then hug and high-five. When David retrieves his hand however, he sees that Nadeem has slipped something into his palm. A small plastic bag. Inside are two, lavender-tinged tablets, each one stamped with a crown.

'What are these?'

'They're left over from last night,' Nadeem grins. 'Just in case things go well. You know, with the writer?'

'What happened to ethical boundaries?' he laughs. 'So just to be clear, you think it's okay for me to get high with my autobiographer just as long as I don't sleep with her? Come on, I don't need these.'

David tries to hand over the bag, but Nadeem quickly steps back into his apartment. 'Hang onto them anyway,'

he says as the door crunches closed. 'Never say never, right?'

David shakes his head, slipping the bag into his back pocket. He turns away towards the lift. Somewhere in the distance a chicken squawks.

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'So let me get this straight. Your mother is an English teacher and your father works in... What was it again? Finance?'

David sighs, takes another swig of lukewarm sake. He is sitting with Alice in a small sushi restaurant, a kaleidoscopic tower of empty bowls stacked before him. They have been there for over two hours, and so far the conversation has been painfully dull, the same inconsequential details chewed over endlessly.

'Uh-huh,' he says, his hand darting out to pluck a passing school of prawn tempuras from the conveyor belt. 'Dad works in finance. Pensions, I think. And, like I told you before, they've been married for a hundred years. They're both incredibly happy, well-adjusted, *boring* people. But I have to be honest, Ali, I don't know why you want to go over all this family stuff again? Surely nobody's going to care about what my dad does for a living, or how many children my older sister has, or where we spent our summer holidays? They just want to know about the videos. By the way, did I tell you about the one I shot with Nadeem this afternoon? It was *totally* crazy. He actually had a live chicken with him.'

As David talks, Alice finds herself zoning out. She sets down her pen, takes off her glasses and screws up her eyes, massaging her temples with the tips of her fingers. It's been a long day. A long month. Of course she's already watched the chicken video. That and another five hundred just like it. She's spent entire nights sitting with a notepad, staring square-eyed at the screen while the man she is professionally obliged to shadow, grins and gurns, an endless screed of inane nonsense dribbling from his mouth and bubbling from her tinny laptop speakers.

'That sounds great, David,' she says, slipping her glasses back on and taking a deep breath in an attempt to re-centre herself. 'I'll try and include a section about the chicken in the book. However, what I'm interested in right now is providing some background. I want to show them the *real* you. Not just the guy we see on the screen every day.'

David shrugs. 'I don't know what to say. The person on the screen *is* me. That's the whole point. I live my life, I share it on video. I'm an open book. Hey, do you want to go somewhere else and grab another drink? I'm not sure I can face any more sake.'

At this, Alice's frayed patience unravels entirely. 'Look. I appreciate you're not interested in going over this stuff, but can you please at least attempt to trust me when I tell you that it's important. You have to understand that you're going to be a character in a book. Every character needs context. The reader has to know where they've come from, what they've been through. I'm not saying you have to be likeable. But you do have to be believable. You need substance. Dreams and desires. Hopes and fears.'

Emotional heft. You have to feel like a real person rather than some two-dimensional cypher – otherwise why would they possibly care what happens to you?’

David stares at her, his mouth puckering as he digests her words. ‘Likeable, huh? That’s an interesting one. I wonder how many “likes” I’ve had since we began this stupid conversation?’

‘No, I’m sorry. That came out wrong...’

‘No, really. It’s fine,’ David replies, snatching up his phone. ‘Oh, will you look at that? My last video has got fifty thousand thumbs up in the last half an hour alone. Not bad. Especially for someone who isn’t even a *real person*.’

‘Come on, David. I’m just trying to give you some sound advice here. I’ve been writing stories since I was five-years-old. And even if no one wants to publish *my* books, my last three biographies have been international bestsellers. Believe it or not, I actually know what I’m talking about. And as much as it kills the frustrated-novelist in me, it’s all just a formula. Boxes that need ticking. Rags to riches. Triumph over adversity. Laughter through tears. You churn it out and the public lap it up. It’s a money factory. But only if you do it right. Which means, you need a strong personality underpinning the whole thing. All I was saying...’

‘I know perfectly what you’re saying. You think I’m boring. You think that just because I’m lucky enough to come from a happy, functional family and I’ve had a bit of success it makes me inferior somehow. Or at least makes me less interesting as a “character”. Well guess what? I don’t care. You might not respect or enjoy what I do, but there are

evidently lots of people out there who do. I'm an entertainer. I don't pretend to be high art, or whatever it is you'd rather be writing about. I just do my thing. If people choose to watch it, they can. And if they don't like it, well that's fine too. No one's making them.'

A sticky silence passes while Alice picks absentmindedly at a splatter of wasabi on the table. 'I'm sorry,' she says eventually. 'I wasn't trying to...'

'Don't worry about it,' David says, gathering up his things to leave. 'I don't need you to like me.'

'Come on, that's not fair. I never said I didn't like you.'

'It's fine. We'll pick this up another day. I'll get Sarah to schedule something.'

He stands, throws a couple of creased bank notes onto the table. 'You know, it's funny. Considering it's your job to get inside my head, you don't actually know the slightest thing about me. You might think I'm not very interesting, but just yesterday I got offered a project that's going to change everything. I'm going to be massive, Alice. The whole world's going to be watching me. Then we'll see who's got nothing to say.'

'David, come on. I thought you wanted to get another drink? What project are you talking about? David. David...'

He heads for the door, ignoring her calls. He intends to get a taxi home, yet as he slips his hand into his pocket to retrieve his phone, his fingers brush against something else.

A small plastic bag.

Discreetly, he fishes it out and opens his palm. Two chalky tablets stare up at him. Lavender blue. He hesitates. He has things to do in the morning. Videos to shoot. People he's supposed to meet. He runs his thumbnail along the seal of the bag, opens it. He glances over his shoulder. He half expects Alice to have followed him out. But no, she's still sitting at the table, staring helplessly at her notepad. He empties both pills out into his hand. Tips back his head. The bag flutters to the floor.

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The night rushes by like an endless black river, the city lights streaking like spooked fish as David's head vibrates against the window of the taxi. He tries to make out the time but the numbers on his phone don't mean anything. They're just shapes.

It's late. Early. Whatever. He's not ready to sleep yet. Not by a long shot. His shirt is wet, soaked with beer, sweat. He's been out, though he doesn't remember where. A bar? A club? It doesn't matter.

Nothing matters.

He looks back to his phone. He wants to send a message. He wants to talk to someone. He's having trouble unlocking the screen though. The taxi driver asks him a question. He tries to answer but it's difficult to speak. His back teeth don't seem to want to open wide enough to let the words out.

He swallows hard, tries again.

This time the words do come. Lots of words. It's hard to make them stick together in coherent sentences though. Each one seems to spin off in a different direction every time he opens his mouth, spawning new thoughts that need to be explored before he can move on. After a while he gives up. The driver doesn't seem to understand what he's talking about. In fact, he looks a little frightened in the rear view mirror. It doesn't matter.

Nothing matters.

He tries his phone again.

This time the screen unlocks. He starts to type a message but he can't focus. He closes one eye, but it's still no good. Then he has another idea.

He opens the camera.

He holds out his arm.

He hits Record.

He starts talking.