

ISLAND OF INFLUENCERS

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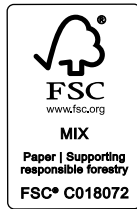
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*For Mum and Dad,
Karen and Roy Turner.*

*Sorry I didn't grow up to be a lawyer or
a doctor, but hey, your names are forever
immortalized on the dedication page of a book
about a topic you have no interest in.*

You're welcome.

Love you.

CHAPTER

1

One day I'm going to be famous. Either that or imprisoned; famous for being imprisoned, or imprisoned by my own fame. I'm not too fussed which one.

Being inside a vast studio with multiple sets and blinding lights fitted all over the place is everything I always imagined the behind-the-scenes of internet fame would be. I'm sitting by a pristine white table, on a stool made of real white leather, picking at the tray of carrot sticks and red pepper hummus.

It's pretty chaotic right now. The production crew is running left and right, setting up props and adjusting the camera angles. I sip my large vanilla chai latte, run my fingers through my long, curly red hair and watch the panic caused by a lost wireless microphone.

A disembodied voice snaps me from my happy place. 'Harper? You're needed on Set Two.'

The foam panels on the walls absorb my name. I drop my latte to the table, and liquid dribbles down my chin as I race to Set Two.

Set Two is crafted to look like the kind of living room

a teenage girl might pin on Pixulz, the virtual mood board. The colours are soft and the furniture elegant, with fleece throws and velvet cushions scattered about the place. It isn't my taste, but I've taken a few naps on the couch before now.

I squeeze past the cameras and step into the spotlights, feeling the heat on my back, then make my way towards my cousin, who is plumping a cushion on the floor beside the set-piece coffee table.

'Did you get my coffee?' asks Belle as she takes a seat, cross-legged, on the giant fluffy cushion.

I glance into the blackness beyond the spotlights and frown at the coffee cup I not long ago finished. 'Yeah, but it was cold, so I threw it away.' I hate lying, but what I said is half-true. The coffee *was* cold, but that's because it'd been sitting on the countertop for over an hour.

See, as much as I want to be a rich and famous influencer, Belle is the real influential content creator around here. For now, I'm just my cousin's personal assistant, running errands and ensuring her online persona remains spotless. Despite having worked for her every Saturday for an entire year now, no one in her fandom even knows I exist. One day I'll be in her shoes, though, and I'll have some annoying wannabe drinking my cold coffee instead.

Belle sighs. Her soft face makes her look younger than her eighteen years (one year older than me), and her bleached blonde hair with baby-pink roots adds to her butter-wouldn't-melt appearance. Her silver 'B' pendant catches the glimmer of the spotlights, almost blinding

me. ‘Harps, this is the second time I’ve asked you to make sure I have a coffee ready to go in between takes,’ she says, her shoulders sagging with disappointment. ‘We’re filming content all day. You know I was at that meet-and-greet event last night. I barely slept and I can already feel myself lagging.’

She throws a glance to the clock hanging above the refreshment station and frowns.

I look at the clock too and cringe at having got my duties so wrong. Going off the amount of powder her make-up artist used on her eyes first thing, I’m guessing Belle’s event went on longer than expected. ‘I bought it this morning and it’s gone midday; I didn’t think you’d want it if it was cold.’

‘Harps, I don’t even remember you telling me you’d bought the drink, otherwise I would have drunk it already.’

I glance down at my feet. I don’t remember telling her about the coffee either. I’ve been sitting around daydreaming, pretending I’m the influencer instead of Belle.

‘I’m sorry I messed up again,’ I whisper.

Belle sighs as she rises to her feet. She puts her hands on my shoulders. I look into her huge blue eyes and feel tears sting my own. ‘Look, your dad asked my dad if I could have you work for me and of course I said yes. You’re my baby cousin and I want you to succeed on Tubeify like I have, but you need to understand how tightly this ship runs. You’re *my* personal assistant, I can’t

be micromanaging you all day. You're supposed to be helping me. I can't believe that I still have to tell you how to do your job after a whole year of working for me part-time. Go and sit at the workstation again. Watch and *learn*, Harper.'

She used my full name. Ouch. Belle has only ever called me Harps, like my parents. I swallow the shame and curse myself for being so bad at the job people my age would swap their sibling for. Being a personal assistant to a famous influencer (even if it is your cousin) is the dream, and here I am messing it up because I can't control my Tubeify fantasies.

Tubeify is an online platform where people of all ages all over the world upload videos about whatever they want. Friends are made on Tubeify, communities built, dreams realized. It's pretty much the best thing in my life, and being a content creator is the only job I've ever wanted, ever since I knew it was a thing. Mum often tells me I let my love of Tubeify get in the way of my studies and making real friends, and I hate that she's right.

My eyes dance over Belle and I hope she sees how sorry I am for being a terrible assistant.

'Don't worry, Harps,' she says. 'Mistakes happen.' Her smile is warm and genuine, but tired, like she doesn't have the strength to fight with me any more.

Belle closes her eyes for a couple of seconds as someone on set straightens the props on the coffee table. The familiar voice of the production manager declares that shooting will begin in two minutes.

I bite my lower lip. I know I should leave, but unspoken words still linger on my tongue. 'I've been meaning to say . . . do you think it's wise to be putting out so much content right now? I mean, what with all the disappearances? Influencers are going missing, and you don't seem worried about it at all.'

Belle shifts her focus to the clock, avoiding my gaze. 'Of course I'm not worried.' Her jaw tenses but she quickly regains herself with her usual sweet smile, and shrugs me off as she retakes her position on the fluffy cushion.

For the past four days, influencers across the Tubeify platform have been disappearing. One minute they're uploading to their regular schedule and the next, there's an ominous message on their community tab, which shows a masked figure and a countdown. After that, no more uploads. I've never been one for conspiracy theories, but even I know something terrible is coming to the realms of social media by the end of the countdown.

'You should know this by now,' Belle says with a sigh. 'The second I stop uploading content, the algorithm will punish my channel and I'll lose subscribers. Or, you know, people will get bored and go watch someone else and I'll lose traffic. I can't afford to worry about being the influencer abductor's next target. This is something you need to take into consideration if you want to be internet-famous. The viewers come first. Always. It's not for the faint-hearted.'

'Clear the set, please,' says a gruff voice behind me.

I jump as a man twice my age barges me out of his way. He hands a box to Belle. I grimace. Paul is Belle's production manager, but I refuse to call him by his name, because he refuses to call me anything other than *Assistant*. I call him *Asswipe*. He's tall and skinny, and his vaping habit has given him a lingering sickly-sweet pineapple smell.

I throw Asswipe a snide look and continue talking to Belle. 'You need to be careful,' I whisper. 'My mum and dad are worried about you and . . . so am I.'

A hand wraps its way around my upper arm and I'm yanked off set. The taste of artificial pineapple clogs my throat as the cameras start to roll and I sink into the shadows by the workstation. I can't help feeling uneasy about the amount of content Belle's currently pumping out. It's like she's screaming for the influencer abductor to target her next.

Sitting on her oversized cushion, Belle puts on her cheery voice and grins into the lens. She slowly opens the box, making sure to angle it perfectly for the camera.

A gleam of gold catches my eye. I gasp.

Belle hit a million subscribers on her Tubeify channel last week and the platform has sent her a Golden Plaque as a reward. I squeal and my fingertips tingle because I'm squeezing my arms too tightly across my chest. I'd do anything for one of those, and as Belle's eyes flicker nonchalantly over the smooth mirror-like slab of gold, it takes everything in me to hold my tongue and swallow my jealousy.