

## Chapter 1

Amy scrolls through Facebook posts on her iPhone, jabs at the screen and says:

‘I’d kill to get as many likes as her.’

Caitlin looks across the counter, asks:

‘Who?’

‘Charleen.’

Caitlin leans over so she can see the screen. The photo is of Charleen, the dancing queen, in mid-salsa pose with another young woman. Charleen isn’t pouting, but her lips naturally form a kiss shape. Two high-heeled, short-skirted women locked in an embrace give the photo an added sheen. It has already got over a hundred likes.

Amy’s finger hovers over the screen. Why should she give the post another like when it’s already got so many? Yet jealousy won’t improve her own marketability and it’s important to follow the trend. Besides, she can’t help liking the unadorned sensuality and sheer drunken happiness of the image. She gives it a like and carries on scrolling.

Caitlin shakes her head as she turns back to the cappuccino she’s making. SMH, she thinks, SMH. Realising even she is thinking in text speak, Caitlin smiles at life. She likes Charleen’s joyful attitude and doesn’t think Amy should take the whole ‘like’ business so seriously. She and Amy are in to have a wake-up coffee before they start work. Charleen should be in soon as the third barista. Caitlin hands the cappuccino to Amy, says:

‘I can’t believe you’d really kill for that.’

‘It was like a metaphor. Thought you’d get that.’

‘I get the metaphor, but does it really matter so much?’

‘Not for you, no. No offence Caitlin, but no-one is going to kill for your posts about Jane Austen and feminist literature.’

Caitlin adjusts her glasses in mock hurt, says:

‘How can you say such a thing?’

‘You want likes, get pouting bitch.’

Caitlin makes an exaggerated pout, crosses her eyes. Amy frowns, says:

‘Stick with the literature.’

Amy takes a photo of her cappuccino, uploads it to Twitter and by default Facebook with the caption:

‘First coffee of the day. Bliss. #CampusCafé.’

The hashtag is for the café’s benefit rather than her personally, but every tweet is a chance to hone her marketing skills.

Caitlin checks the time, says:

‘Where is Charleen anyway?’

‘Probably still hungover. Or woke up in the wrong bed.’

‘Meow.’

‘I know, I’m such a bitch.’

‘I’ll call her.’

Caitlin gets out her own phone, calls Charleen but gets no answer. She sends a good old fashioned text:

‘All ok? Coming in?’

A bleep on Amy’s phone and she switches from Facebook to Tinder. She sighs at the message and types:

‘Yes, I have breasts. No, I won’t be showing them to you.’

Another bleep and a photo comes through. She turns her phone to show Caitlin a picture of an erect penis, says:

‘What’s with all the dick pics on this app? I don’t work in a sexual health clinic.’

Amy deletes the guy as a match, starts some swipe action. Left. Left. Left. Right. Left...

Caitlin comments:

‘Careful or you’ll get tinderitus.’

‘Can you catch that touching a screen?’

Caitlin checks her phone. There is no reply from Charleen and no time to do anything about it as the café is due to open any minute. There will just be the two of them today. Charleen is the only full time barista, having dropped out of Uni. Caitlin is in her third year of Creative Writing and Amy is in her first year of Social Media Marketing.

The café is on campus, a gap year venture of Business Management student Grace. She can’t step in instead of Charleen because she’s out checking a new coffee blend. It’s partly Grace’s get-go personality that has made Campus Café such a success. And also that as an independent café it fits in with Uni life.

Caitlin and Amy get to work as customers pour in. The café is incredibly popular amongst students and professors, so the two women don’t stop making espressos, cappuccinos and lattes. Although somehow, Amy finds time to tweet a photo of herself as an overworked barista. The early morning take-aways are replaced by mid-morning breaks. A couple of customers ask after Charleen and get a pouted reply from Amy:

‘Are we not good enough for you?’

Amy is definitely good enough for lots of guys. She’s slim and goes to the gym, wears clothes to show off her body without displaying too much. The bob haircut is both business-like and femme-fatale. But there’s no time to swap numbers, just a quick flick of her name badge:

‘Check me on insta or snapchat.’

Caitlin doesn’t get the same attention, but she’s genuinely not jealous. It’s not that she’s unattractive. Some guys go for the curls and glasses look, just not the same ones who send dick pics to Amy.

As the lunch-time crowd start arriving, Grace returns to the café. Caitlin knows that Grace wasn't born rich, but still thinks of her as a Nigerian princess. With her erect posture, beaming smile and correct speech, Grace asks:

'Is there still no news from Charleen?'

Caitlin checks her phone, says:

'No.'

'It is unlike her.'

It's true. Charleen likes to party, but she's never taken a day off sick and always works hard. Ever since she dropped out, working in the café is one part of her life, clubbing the other. Amy can't help saying:

'Maybe last night really was a long night.'

Ever-gracious, Grace defends her missing employee:

'We all need one now and then.'

'Just a pity that made more work for us.'

Grace stays behind the counter for the afternoon and with three of them at work, it is less tiring. By five, they are finally finished. The café is usually open at night for some event, but this evening it is closed so that the University's resident artist Irina can put up video installations on the walls. 'Amazing Grace and Russian Irina', as Amy calls them: the regal business-woman and dramatic artist, two high-flyers in collaboration.

As soon as the shift is over, Amy is on her phone, flicking through Twitter and Facebook. She grabs Caitlin for a quick Snapchat selfie, gives them both donkey ears to show how much they've been working and posts the photo. And with that, she's out of there.

Caitlin gathers her jacket, heads to her campus flat too. The university is new, built five years earlier. Art studios are state of the art, lecture halls are equipped with all visual and audio aids, student residences are padded out as modern apartments. You have to be good to get in. As is

inscribed on the entrance monument, this is UCASS: University of Creative Arts and Social Sciences. Set in the Cotswolds, it is an out of town encampment, a world of its own.

The campus has shops and restaurants, so you hardly need to go into town, unless you go clubbing like Charleen. From the main entrance, the road goes direct to the town centre, busses every few minutes. Though if you fancy a walk, there is an old canal with a path that goes most of the way. Caitlin sometimes uses it to gather her thoughts. Now she's tired and just wants to relax at home.

In her studio-flat, she makes a cup of tea and sits on her bed. The place is tiny, an all-in-one room, but she prefers it to sharing. She needs to be by herself so she can have time to write. Not that she's planning to do any tonight. Too tired from making a million coffees. She hits up the internet on her phone.

Caitlin isn't immune to checking Facebook, she's just not as addicted as Amy is to all forms of social media. Or maybe it's that she's more passive whereas Amy is active. Caitlin sees the photo Amy put up of the two of them and smiles. It's already got more likes than any of her own posts. She doesn't care. Of course Amy's selfies or Charleen's dance moves get more likes than her posts about literature. She's not sure she has ever posted about Jane Austen, but it's true she writes about books she likes, especially by female writers. Her last post was about an event she went to called 'How to be a Bestseller' by thriller writer Silvia Hunt.

As Caitlin checks if anyone has commented on her post, she sees that Kel is online. Kel studies criminology. They became online friends through connections with other friends, liked each other's shared posts. They don't see each other much, but chat a lot. Caitlin types and sends a message:

'Hey, sorted out any crimes today?'

The reply comes back:

‘Just reading about how a drug dealer was caught because he posted photos of himself in a bath of stolen money. Who needs to investigate criminals when they give themselves away like that?’

‘Online Investigator. Could be a new role in the police.’

‘True. Your day ok?’

‘Busy. Charleen off work so just two of us.’

‘Sick?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘Saw her photos from last night.’

‘I know, but no sign this morn.’

‘Too hungover?’

‘Guess so.’

‘Also reading about that girl who committed suicide in Bristol Uni. Did you see that?’

‘Tell me.’

‘Boyfriend posted revenge porn. Girl couldn’t cope so hung herself. Question now is if the guy will be found guilty for causing her death.’

‘Crazy world.’

‘Hey, wait a sec.’

Caitlin takes the opportunity to sip her tea and glance away from the screen, absently looking at her bookshelf. Yes, *Pride and Prejudice* is there. But so is *Gone Girl* and *50 Shades of Grey*. You have to read widely if you want to be a writer. Caitlin imagines one day her name will be on a spine. She just has to write the novel. And sell it. Would Jane Austen get a deal these days? She doubts it. A bleep brings her back to her phone. She clicks up a new message from Kel:

‘Have you seen the news?’

‘No, what?’

‘Check the feed.’

Caitlin checks the feed, sees the host of posts and photos popping up one after another. It’s a swirl of rumours:

‘The police have cordoned off the canal.’

‘What’s happened?’

‘Maybe someone drowned.’

The first photo appears, a policeman in the foreground trying to block the view, divers in the background, pulling something out of the water.

Caitlin gets a message from Kel:

‘I have to get down there.’

‘Ok.’

It’s all Caitlin can type. She understands Kel’s curiosity, it’s why she studies criminology, it’s what drives her. But she’s not sure she understands this morbid modern life where every single thing has to be posted online.

The next photo is uploaded and the comments come fast:

‘It’s a body!’

‘Someone’s dead!!’

‘OMG, who is it?!!!’

Another message comes through from Kel:

‘Fuck, look at the heels and skirt.’

Caitlin doesn’t want to, but looks at the photo. Although the dead body is obscured by policemen, the legs can be seen. It’s the same heels and skirt Charleen was wearing in her salsa-dancing photo from the night before.