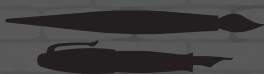


# Follow Your Arrow

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# CHAPTER 1



I study the app post like it's a Renaissance painting, dissecting and analyzing each detail before tapping the button that will send it out to the world. It took me ten minutes of crafting and deleting and rewriting to land on this combination of words and images and emphasis, but I'm still not sure about it.

Do the all-caps and exclamation points convey the right level of enthusiasm, or does the tone tip over into annoying? And I purposely limited the hashtags to three, because too many and people will just scroll right by instead of putting in the effort to read, but maybe I should have hashtagged #spring and #news too? For discoverability? And the emojis . . . I love emojis, but sometimes I wonder if everyone else in the world is over them and I'm showing how out of touch I am when I use them too much. Not that anyone's said, "Hey, CeCe, you might want to rethink how many emojis you use" or anything. I just . . . I don't know. I worry.

"Does this look okay?" I ask Silvie, holding the screen out. We're lying on the floor in her room—our usual hangout spot. My leg is draped over hers, and we're both scrolling on our phones—our usual position.

Silvie's room is spacious, artfully designed, and looks like an

#ad. Lots of white furniture, framed photography, and intentional pops of color. We spend most of our time at Silvie’s house, especially on weekends when my mom’s working long hours, or when we have a video to record or a livestream to do, like today. The sleek lines and bright light of her bedroom make for a way more professional backdrop than the chaos of mine.

Silvie skims my post draft in one point five seconds, then glances back at me. “Looks good. Why haven’t you posted it yet?”

“I needed to get it right.”

She rolls her eyes. “Ceece, we go live in”—she checks the time on her own phone—“ten minutes. Just post it; it doesn’t need to be perfect.”

She doesn’t get it. She could post *Hey. Live video at 1. Watch it.* and get fifty thousand likes and a hundred new followers within minutes. Everyone loves Silvia Castillo Ramírez.

I, on the other hand, have had to work incredibly hard to get people to like me and care about what I have to say.

I hold my breath and tap POST. “Okay. Done.”

Silvie goes back to scrolling.

When I first joined social media in seventh grade, @Hi\_Im\_CeCeRoss was a lot different than it is now. Not only my follower count and reach, but the content itself. The few people who actually read my posts probably got a kick out of the twelve-year-old white girl in the Midwest going on epic rants about #gerrymandering and #prisonreform and #healthcarepolicies. But I’d been fighting against my father’s conservative beliefs pretty much since I was old enough to speak.

It was not only all I knew; it was *who I was*. And at first, the app felt like a natural extension of that: a chance to express my views without my dad telling me I was wrong, or that I'd understand when I was older, or that I was embarrassing myself. I didn't edit, didn't self-censor, didn't obsess. I posted whatever was on my mind.

But then my father left.

And everything changed.

Suddenly I didn't want to be The Girl with All the Opinions anymore, the girl who was so strong-willed, so defiant, it had torn her family apart. I just wanted to be happy, for once. I wanted—needed—a chance to breathe.

When Silvie and I met, she already had a following online—people actually *listened* to her, looked to her for her thoughts and perspective. Sure, her feed was mainly about stuff like #fashion and #style, but still. She was happy.

So I followed her lead.

For over two years now, I've done everything I can to make it look like my life is as shiny and special as Silvie's. And that's the thing about social media: You get to decide how people see you. You *can* become a casual, confident, carefree girl with more friends than she can keep track of and not a single problem to be seen. Every post, each comment, is another stitch in the tapestry of my online world. A heavily filtered selfie here, a post with a potentially controversial opinion edited out before being posted there, and about a zillion tongue-biting, sugary-sweet replies to haters. And honestly, even the haters are tolerable, because #lifestyle influencing might invite eye rolls, but it rarely

invites the vitriol that fighting over immigration policies does. It certainly doesn't lead to shouting matches so intense they make the walls of your house shake. It doesn't stretch the limits of family, and it doesn't result in divorce.

"You really need to stop overanalyzing everything," Silvie says, clicking her phone off, untangling her leg from mine, and standing to stretch. It's an unseasonably warm day for late March in Cincinnati, but the loss of skin-to-skin contact sends an instant shiver over me. "It's not good for you."

That's where she's wrong.

Overanalyzing—though I prefer to call it *curating*—has *worked*. Silvie may have 1,200,000 followers, but I have 985,000. She might have six sponsorships at the moment, but I have four. We're both continually featured on Famous Birthdays's "trending influencers" list.

Life isn't perfect, the *world* isn't perfect, but the time I spend on the app is as close to perfect as I've found. It's my loophole. And I'd like to keep it.

Speaking of, I need to retouch my makeup before we go live. I sit at Silvie's vanity and uncap the eyeliner I keep at her house, while she comes up behind me and grabs her brush. People often do double takes when they meet my girlfriend in person for the first time, because her combination of blue-green eyes, dark hair, and olive skin is unexpected. But those same people invariably go back for a third and fourth glance. Silvie is truly one of the most beautiful people most of us have ever seen, even online.

I, along with most of the world, am a little more ordinary-

looking than Silvie. But in moments like this, studying our side-by-side reflections, it's not hard to see what our fans see: Silvie and I don't only look good together; we look like we *go* together. Our hair is almost the same shade of dark brown—Silvie's long, mine falling in a blunt bob to just above my chin. And even though Silvie's seven inches taller than me, we *fit*. My skin is pale, and my eyes are a basic brown, but I think I have nice eyebrows and shoulders, and my earlobes are just the right shape for earrings. The ones I'm wearing right now are little yellow dangly houses; they were a birthday gift from Silvie last year. Silvie's wearing the LESBIAN LIKE WHOA T-shirt she got at a thrift store.

She finishes fixing her loose side pony, and I wordlessly hand her a bottle of hand lotion. Whenever she brushes her hair, she likes to rub a tiny bit of lotion into her hands, then gently tamp down the frizzies on the top of her head. After being together for over two years, we know each other's quirks like they're our own.

"This stuff is the best, isn't it?" she says as she squeezes a small amount of lotion into her palm and massages her hands together.

"What, the hand cream?" I lean closer to the mirror and dab some of Silvie's coral-tinted lip gloss onto my lips.

"Yeah, all the Dana & Leslie stuff. It's insane that they're not more mainstream."

"Well, that's what they have you for." I give her a smile, then quickly devote my attention to applying a pointless second layer of lip gloss.

Dana & Leslie is the gender-inclusive, organic, cruelty-free skincare brand Silvie's an ambassador for. I fully support their

mission, and the partnership has been great for Silvie, but if I'm being honest, I can't stand the cloying smell of that lotion. And the face wash dried my skin out.

I've been avoiding sharing my opinions on Dana & Leslie with Silvie, because she's really proud of her collaboration with them, and I don't want to start a fight or come across as unsupportive. I even purposely left all the products she gave me out in plain view on my bedside table at home just so she would see them when she came over.

But I guess I don't have her fooled. She's staring at me, unblinking, in the mirror, clearly waiting for a more emphatic agreement that Dana & Leslie products are, in fact, "the best."

Sigh.

Silvie and I mastered the art of the face-off long ago, and I have no choice but to allow myself to stare back. I know what she's thinking, she knows what I'm thinking, and we both know we're on a moving bus, just a stop or two away from *The Argument of the Day*.

But we're only four minutes out from one p.m., so Silvie returns the Dana & Leslie lotion to its home on the vanity and wordlessly finishes her hair.

"Looks nice," I say gently, an attempt at keeping the atmosphere light.

Silvie and I have always bickered. It used to be a point of pride for me. It proved, I thought, that you can be in a committed, long-term relationship with another person but still have your own thoughts and opinions, likes and dislikes. Like this



painting I saw once at a museum of two people forehead to forehead, balancing on a board placed on top of a ball. I remember thinking that, apart from it being a man and a woman in the painting, the depiction could have been me and Silvie. Two individuals, each unique and strong-willed, yet when they're together, perfectly balanced. Not halves of a whole, but two wholes who do better together than apart.

Lately, though, the board has tipped, and our balance is off. It seems every little thing I've said or done these last few days has annoyed Silvie. She hasn't been smiling as much, hasn't been finding excuses to touch or hug or kiss me all the time like she used to. The bickering has turned into arguing, and the arguments are taking longer and longer to rebound from.

I know she's stressed about the prom planning. It's part of her responsibilities as president of our school's Gender and Sexuality Alliance (I'm vice president—our dynamic is nothing if not consistent). Silvie and I had planned to spend this afternoon brainstorming not-cheesy prom theme ideas to bring to our next GSA meeting. We also wanted to put out feelers to @DJRio, a Chicago-based DJ who follows us both on the app, to see if he'd consider DJing our prom. But I can't help but feel like there's something else going on with her.

"Just don't post about it," she says finally, her tone clipped.

"Post about what?"

"That you don't like the Dana & Leslie products. It was really nice of them to send extra freebies for you."

In one second flat, the air in the room goes stale.

“Are you kidding me?” I splutter.

“What?”

“Since when do I post about stuff like that?”

This makes no sense. I don’t post *anything* without double- and triple-checking it. I would never do anything to jeopardize Silvie’s career, or the work we both do, or *our freaking relationship*.

She knows that. But all she says is “Just saying.”

“Right, okay.” I mimic the action of typing on my phone and pretend to read aloud. “Hey, just thought you’d all like to know that Dana & Leslie, the company my girlfriend, Silvia Castillo Ramírez, is an ambassador for, is overpriced garbage and I don’t know why anyone would ever want to use the stuff. ’K’ byeeee!”

I wait for her to apologize. Laugh at the ridiculousness of it. She doesn’t. She simply picks up her phone again and asks, her voice flat, “Ready to go live?”

*NO, I’m not ready to go live, I want to retort. You’re being a brat and really unfair and we need to talk about this.*

But it’s one o’clock. We have work to do.

I check my teeth in the reflective, silvery material of my phone case, and nod. Without further discussion, we sit on Silvie’s bed. Our bodies inch closer together and our smiles appear. Silvie hits the GO LIVE button.

“Hey, everyone!” I say, giving a little wave as the screen projects our images back to us.

“Happy Saturday!” Silvie says.

“And happy spring!” I add. Today is March 20, the official

first day of spring. I *love* spring. The hours of sunlight stretch longer, you can wear dresses without tights underneath, and avocados are in season again.

“Oh yeah! Spring break is only three weeks away!” Silvie says. “I’m going to Mexico to visit my grandparents, and we have plans to spend a few days at the beach. I cannot *wait*.”

“Bring me back a seashell?” I squeeze her hand, and she laughs.

“I’ll bring you a hundred seashells, babe.” She looks at me with hearts in her eyes, and I take my first real breath since the lotion debacle. *We’re back at equilibrium*, I think with no small measure of relief. *It was just bickering, not fighting. She’s not mad at me. Everything’s fine.*

“We have lots to share today, so let’s get to it, shall we?” Silvie says.

“Yes, let’s!” I slide a sealed brown box across the bed into the camera frame and grab scissors from Silvie’s nightstand. “This package just arrived this morning from an awesome new company called Benevolence.” Silvie holds the camera steady as I slice the packing tape open. Our followers *love* a good #unboxing vid, and I have to admit, I do too. There’s something inherently relatable about the feeling you get when a new package arrives on your doorstep, the little thrill that zips through you as you open it up, eager for its secrets to be revealed. Will the item inside match your expectations? Will it fit? Will it be the right color? Or maybe it’s a gift from someone, and you have no idea what you’ll find beneath the cardboard box flaps.