

CLICKBAIT

a short film

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PROLOGUE

Black screen. The soft electronic chime of a livestream going live.

A fast, silent recap flashes past: grainy phone clips, a burning blue filter, a title card that reads BLUE, faces of teenagers we will never meet again. The montage collapses into a single pulsing red RECORDING dot, and the dot becomes an eye.

1

INT. NORA'S BEDROOM - DAY (WEBCAM FEED)

1

We are watching a webcam. A headshot, slightly too close, lit by a ring light we can see reflected in her pupils. NORA, early twenties, camera-ready, sits against a wall of fairy lights and pinned photographs. In the corner of the frame: a live viewer count, ticking upward.

NORA

And this is the video that made me famous.

She lets the line land, then softens into her presenter smile.

NORA (CONT'D)

Hi guys, it's Nora, welcome back to my channel. You're probably wondering why I decided to talk about this video again. Those of you who have been with me for a while know that today is the second anniversary of the death of Rashad Ahmed. He wasn't just the mind behind that video. He was someone very dear to me.

A photograph of RASHAD fills the frame for a beat. Nora holds back tears. Her eyes drift off-camera, around the room, and come back.

NORA (CONT'D)

Anyway. It's almost three years since the challenge blew up. Can you believe that? By now I've become a blogger of, can we call it, some renown? And yet none of my videos about the deep web has ever come close to the numbers on that one. I think it's time we figure out why. So tell me. Drop it below. What do you want to see on my next video?

COMMENTS scroll up the side of the frame. Nora scans them, mouthing replies we cannot quite read. One catches her eye.

NORA (CONT'D)

Charter web mystery boxes. Ooh. I like that. But let's make it more interesting.

She types. We hear the keys.

NORA (CONT'D)

I'll set up polls during the live stream, so you get to vote for what I do next. In real time. You like that idea?

A poll graphic slides across the feed: DO YOU LIKE THE IDEA? The bar floods to YES.

NORA (CONT'D)

Alright. Let's do this. You get to control my life.

She laughs, delighted, and reaches for the lens.

SMASH CUT TO:

2

DISCLAIMER - TEXT ON BLACK

2

White text types itself onto a black screen, letter by letter.

(on screen)

The World Wide Web is divided into eight levels.

The first three, the Common Surface and the Bergie Web, are the ordinary internet: the sites indexed by every search engine. The fourth level, the Deep Web, holds hacking forums, stolen information, and gore, including suicide videos.

The fifth level, the Charter Web, is home to the black markets, run by criminal organizations at war with one another.

This level became infamous when video bloggers began recording themselves unboxing so-called mystery boxes, supposedly bought on those markets. As the trend grew, several bloggers admitted they had packed the boxes themselves, staging the danger to sell the clickbait.

The following video was live-streamed on Eleanor Lawrence's channel on the night of August 16.

A last line resolves, alone on the screen.

(on screen)
Viewer discretion advised.

CUT TO:

3 INT. NORA'S BEDROOM / HALLWAY - NIGHT (WEBCAM FEED) 3

The webcam again, but the room is dark now, lit blue by the monitor. The viewer count is far higher than before.

NORA
Hi guys. I know it's late, but it's been a few days since my last stream, and I just heard the doorbell. If I'm right, this is going to make for a very exciting video. Give me one second, let me connect my phone to the stream so I can take you with me.

The feed splits. A second window opens: her PHONE CAMERA, shaky, handheld. She stands, and the webcam watches her empty chair.

NORA (CONT'D)
For anyone who missed the last video: one of you suggested I buy a mystery box from a black market on the charter web and live-stream the unboxing. So.

The phone follows her down a short hallway to the front door. She opens it. Cold air. An empty landing.

NORA (CONT'D)
Oh my god. Here it is.

She tilts the phone down. On the floor sits a plain cardboard BOX, unmarked, taped shut. She crouches, lifts it. It rises too easily in her hands.

NORA (CONT'D)
Huh. It's way lighter than I expected. Let's just hope there's something interesting inside.

She carries it back inside. In the comment feed, a new tone creeps in: FAKE. STAGED. WE'VE SEEN THIS ONE BEFORE.

CUT TO:

4 INT. NORA'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT (WEBCAM + PHONE FEED) 4

She settles in front of the laptop and props the phone so it looks down at her lap, where the box waits. She scans the chat.

NORA

Someone's asking how I even ordered it. Okay. My friend Laurel, who has some, let's say, hacking skills, offered to help, and we managed to place the order together. Love you, Laurel.

She blows a kiss at the lens.

NORA (CONT'D)

Alright, this way you can see every angle of the unboxing.

She runs her fingers across the lid. They come away gray.

NORA (CONT'D)

(uneasy)

That's weird. It's really dusty. Maybe it's an old box. Okay. Should I open it?

A poll blooms across the feed: OPEN IT? An overwhelming YES. She takes a small knife, slits the tape, and folds back the flaps. The box is packed tight with rolled-up NEWSPAPERS.

CUT TO:

5

INT. NORA'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT (PHONE FEED)

5

Handheld now. She lifts out the newspaper rolls one by one and pans across them.

NORA

This is really underwhelming. If I paid all that for a box of old newspapers, I swear.

Back to the WEBCAM. She keeps digging, elbow-deep, and stops. At the very bottom, half-buried, is a small black USB STICK. She holds it up to the lens.

NORA (CONT'D)

Okay, now that's interesting. Should I see what's on it?

Another poll. Majority YES. She sets the empty box on the floor. The comments shift again, faster now: DON'T. DON'T PLUG IT IN. NORA DON'T.

She plugs the USB into the laptop. The webcam feed is swallowed by a shared screen. A single video file. She opens it. A flat, MECHANICAL VOICE begins to speak.

DISTORTED VOICE (V.O.)

You should not have done this, Nora.

(MORE)

DISTORTED VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The box you just opened was coated with a nerve agent. It will kill you in thirty minutes. If you want a chance to survive, you will confess to your followers what really happened to Rashad. You will understand more once you read the articles inside the box.

A COUNTDOWN snaps onto the screen. 30:00. It begins to fall. The webcam feed returns. Nora is staring at her own hands.

NORA

What. No. No, no, no.

She grabs a packet of makeup wipes and scrubs at her palms, frantic. Her fingers jump. A spasm ripples up her forearm and she watches it happen like it belongs to someone else. She snatches her phone and runs.

CUT TO:

6

INT. NORA'S BATHROOM - NIGHT (PHONE FEED)

6

Handheld, lurching. Harsh white light. She pumps soap into her hands and drives it up her arms, again and again. Her fingers will not cooperate. She fumbles the bottle, drops it, claws it back. Water roars. She screams, a raw sound, and forces her hands under the tap.

In the chat, reflected in the mirror behind her, the comments have turned to a single word repeated down the screen: CONFESS. CONFESS. CONFESS.

Another spasm folds her forward. She grips the sink, breathes, and runs back out.

CUT TO:

7

INT. NORA'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT (WEBCAM + PHONE FEED)

7

She drops the laptop onto the floor and sinks down beside it, surrounded by the scattered newspaper rolls. The countdown glows over her shoulder. She tears one roll open, then another, and freezes. On the back of every article, stamped in red, is one word: CONFESS.

The phone pushes in close on the newsprint. She reads the headlines aloud, her voice cracking, the paper shaking in her hands.

NORA

(reading)

Bluebird Challenge causes multiple deaths.

(MORE)

NORA (CONT'D)

Teenager takes own life over deep web challenge. A wave of deaths spreads across the world.

A spasm tears through her. She drops the paper and slides flat onto the floor, crying.

NORA (CONT'D)

Okay. Okay, I'll do it. I'll confess everything.

She drags a breath in, wipes her face, and pulls herself up to the lens. Close on her now. When she speaks, it is quiet and clear.

NORA (CONT'D)

Rashad and I wanted to build something that would make us famous. All we needed was one viral video. We thought a deadly challenge would be interesting to film, and that is how the Bluebird Challenge was born.

(a spasm rocks her)

When our plan fell apart, when nobody watched, Rashad pushed me to start luring kids on social media. To talk them into taking part. That is how it became real. That is how it crossed borders.

(spasm)

So many people got pulled in that when our original video surfaced on a deep web server, someone reposted it everywhere. It went viral overnight. And the truth is, our hunger for fame killed people. That is what we were willing to trade for the views. Rashad's guilt caught up with him. It is what led him to take his own life. I can't say sorry enough. I was blinded. I was blinded by fame.

The screen flashes. An INCOMING VIDEO CALL. She hesitates, then answers. The call window fills the feed: LAUREL, bound to a chair, a gag across her mouth, screaming into it. Nora recoils.

DISTORTED VOICE (V.O.)

Because of your greed, the Bluebird Challenge threw a light on the deep web. It brought hunters down on the organizations that work there. Several of our sites went dark. You threw a wrench into the machine of organized crime.

(beat)

(MORE)

DISTORTED VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

You confessed. It is not enough.
You said it yourself, Nora. Your
followers control your life.
Tonight they become your jury. They
will decide whether you live or
die.

A final poll expands across the whole screen, over Laurel's face, over the countdown: SHOULD NORA LIVE OR DIE? Two bars, climbing against each other. Nora grabs the laptop and hauls it into her lap, curled around it on the floor.

The chat argues with itself: IT'S CLICKBAIT. IT'S FAKE. SHE'S ACTING. GUYS IT'S A BIT.

NORA

(to the camera, begging)
Please. Please vote for me to live.
This is not a clickbait video. This
is not planned. I swear to you,
this has gone horribly wrong, and I
will never, ever do anything like
this again. Please.

One comment surfaces above the rest, and the phone feed catches it, held long enough to read.

(on screen)
let's vote for her to die and see
what happens

The DIE bar surges. The countdown falls through 00:10.

The lights die. The room goes black, lit only by the laptop. Nora screams. Behind her, slowly, the front door swings open. She twists toward it, then throws herself back at the laptop and crawls for the lens.

00:03. 00:02. 00:01.

00:00.

The feed cuts to black. A line of small gray text appears, and holds.

(on screen)
STREAM ENDED

CUT TO BLACK.

TITLE AND CREDITS

CLICKBAIT.