

Chapter 1

Alice Rochester walked straight to the front of the queue outside *Emerald's*, the exclusive Members Only club in Mayfair where she was meeting her boarding-school chums. People glared at her and muttered under their breath. Too bad for them. When you have a father as powerful as Richard Rochester, you don't wait around on the street.

'Hi there, Graham,' Alice purred, flashing her most charming smile.

'Evening, Miss Rochester,' the doorman said, touching his blue cap and lifting open the club's heavy velvet curtain for her. Alice brushed past, trailing a cloud of jasmine perfume. Victory, as usual. Bouncers, taxi drivers, the ladies who served lunch in the school dining room – she could always get everyone to do what she wanted.

Inside, *Emerald's* was dim and steamy, lit only by glowing panels of pink and green and blue light. London's teenage It crowd sipped £15 Cosmopolitans from gleaming glasses at the bar, while the DJ blasted hits from the seventies and eighties – the kind of tunes Alice and her friends would get pissed and grind to later.

But Alice ignored the music for now; she wouldn't be caught dead dancing on her own. Instead, she craned her neck towards the back of the room. There her crew was. She could just make them out through the darkness, lounging on low-slung couches around Seb Ogilvy's table. Dropping the Ogilvy name guaranteed that the barman would serve them, even though most of them were only sixteen. Alice spied three bottles of champagne cooling in a big silver ice-bucket. There'd be more where that came from. Bring it on.

Weaving her way towards her friends, she slipped safely through a vortex of sloppily dancing men with their shirts untucked and their crotches gyrating like blenders. Bunch of wanker bankers, probably. Alice despised types like that. But it was good to be home. Holidaying in her family's St Tropez villa was fine for a week – but a month of doing nothing but sunbathing, swimming, playing tennis, and eating French food with her parents and two brothers, Hugo and Dominic? Mind-numbing! If Alice had to stomach one more piece of Brie, she was going to be sick. Thank fuck that in the morning the Rochesters' chauffeur, Marshy, was driving her and her best friend Natalya Abbott back to St Cecilia's School – the eighteenth-century stately pile, surrounded by rolling fields, where Alice had been a pupil since she was eleven years old.

'Oh my *god!*' a voice yelped. 'Sweetie, you're home! I'm so happy!' Natalya Abbott flung her arms around Alice's neck, almost spilling the Martini that a smitten

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admirer had just bought her at the bar. ‘Oops!’ she giggled, swaying unsteadily on her platform heels.

‘Darling!’ Alice cried. ‘I missed you so much.’ She swept her gaze up and down her friend. Tally’s white-blond hair was cascading onto her shoulders and her cheeks were flushed. Her slender, lithe figure always reminded Alice of those Toulouse-Lautrec sketches of Parisian can-can dancers – the ones Alice had bought posters of at the National Gallery last year and Blu-tacked above her dormitory bed at school. Tally wasn’t tall, but like them, she moved with a wild, chaotic grace that magnetised men wherever she went. It drove Alice mad that boys were so taken in by her best friend – by the fact that she was half-Russian and so flighty she could barely tie her own shoelaces. Oh, and by the fact that she was beautiful. You didn’t need to be beautiful to be successful, of course; Alice knew that better than anyone. She’d long ago accepted that her own strength was in looking striking and dressing well, and in being socially indispensable. But still, it was hard for her. No one could imagine what it was like to walk into a room with Tally and have all the boys size you up as second prize.

‘Listen, babe,’ Tally slurred, linking arms with Alice and drawing her across the room, ‘I have massive gossip for you. I’ve just heard it from Seb. So. Funny.’ She hiccuped.

‘Gossip? Come on, it can’t be that big. Is it about—’

‘Shhh!’ Tally hissed, pressing her finger to her lips as they reached the table. There was Sonia Khan, whispering

into Jasper von Holstadt's ear as he gulped champagne from a flûte; next to him was George Demetrios trying to steal Seb Ogilvy's pack of cigarettes, while Seb hunched over the joint he was rolling for later on.

'Mimah's not coming, is she?' Alice asked. Mimah was Jemimah Calthorpe de Vyle-Hanswicke, their ex-best friend. She'd gone schizo last term – turned into a moody cow, to be precise – and they'd been trying to get rid of her ever since.

'Not a chance,' Tally replied. 'We all blanked her the last time she tried to come out. Anyway, who cares about Mimah? I've got far juicier gossip than that.'

'Oh,' Alice mumbled, suddenly not listening. She'd realised who else was missing from the table: Tristan. So the rumours must be true – he was still with his new girlfriend in New York. Just like him to ditch everyone and turn up a day late for school. Tristan Murray-Middleton always did exactly what he wanted, but so charmingly that no one ever noticed he was getting away with murder. Alice missed him. A lot.

'So. Did you find out when our favourite boy's getting back?' she asked Tally, sliding in next to George Demetrios and signalling him to pour her a drink. She sounded nonchalant; she could always pull that off. Not that there was anything suspicious in her asking about Tristan; after all, he was her oldest, closest friend.

'Well.' Tally raised her eyebrows exaggeratedly. 'He'll be here later, of course.' She giggled.

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Alice swallowed. ‘What are you talking about? Isn’t he still in the States with you-know-who?’

‘Not exactly. There’s been a change of plan,’ Tally winked, ‘if you know what I mean.’

‘For fuck’s sake, I haven’t got a *clue* what you mean.’ Alice’s heart was racing. Shit. *Get it together.* Her voice was ridiculously strained and squeaky, and Tally was an expert at picking up on anything weird.

Quickly downing her glass of champagne, Alice thought back for the thousandth time to that week in early July. What had it meant? Nothing? Everything? On a whim, she and Tristan had flown out to Italy together, just the two of them, to stay in Positano, the beautiful, ancient seaside town where the Rochesters owned a vast stone villa. All through the first morning, Alice had watched her friend from a lounge chair on the baking-hot patio, wondering why she’d never noticed how strong and lithe he was, how one moment he could be messing about on the side of the pool, the next be cutting through the water like a bullet. And then, when he looked up at her, shaking his wet hair, and grinned into her eyes, she thought his gaze might melt her on the spot.

That night they ate dinner in the trattoria in town, sharing bottles of local white wine and plates of fresh grilled fish that Tristan ordered in his perfect Italian. Being half-French certainly had its perks where languages were concerned. Late in the evening, a toothless accordion-player serenaded them with an old love song neither of them

knew. Tristan caught Alice's eye, gave her his slow, sly smile, and both of them almost died laughing. Each day following was the same: a live wire of unexplained looks until the sun went down and they finally said good night, kissed each other on both cheeks, and went to bed in separate rooms. On the last night, Alice tossed and turned till dawn, thinking she'd go crazy. Could Tristan possibly want her? Did she want him? Would either of them ever be brave enough to take the plunge?

She hadn't seen or heard from T since then. At the end of the week, he'd flown to New York to spend the rest of the summer playing golf and sailing with his cousins in the Hamptons, and he'd always been rubbish at staying in touch. Alice had only found out about this slapper girlfriend because she'd seen the pictures on Facebook: the two of them all over each other at yacht-club dinners and beach-club parties. To make matters worse, the girl looked like a busty, blonde, rich bitch. What a tacky choice.

Not that Alice cared. She was over it by now.

'Go on.' She turned to Tally. 'What's the scoop?' She felt warm and easy; the champagne was doing its job. But Tally grabbed her arm. Her long nails dug into Alice's skin.

'Not right now,' she whispered. 'Look who's here.'

Alice looked. Her stomach lurched. There he was, Tristan, at the other end of the room, coming towards them through the crowd.