www.mr-expose.com

Hello & Welcome to the UK's Leading Gossip Blog

To be the first to see exclusive footage, hear juicy secrets and enjoy my hard-hitting exposés about your favourite influencers, turn on notifications on all 'Mr Expose' platforms.

I know most of you are here for my scandalous speciality: THE EXES. If you live under a rock and somehow still don't know who they are, I recommend glancing over the following profiles before proceeding:

Karim Malik

Age:	17
Interests:	Business Ventures, Creating Viral Content, Gaming
Star Sign:	Gemini
Talent:	Ironically enough – Spotting Others' Talent
Best Friend:	Abeo Okon
Closest Connection:	Chloe Clark (long-time on–off girlfriend)
Ambition:	World-renowned Businessman

Chloe Clark

Age:	17
Interests:	Singing, Socialite Events, Photography, Fashion Trends
Star Sign:	Aries
Talent:	Singer-Songwriter, Guitarist, Lifestyle Photographer
Best Friend:	Felicity Wong
Closest Connection:	Karim Malik (long-time on–off boyfriend)
Ambition:	Popstar

Felicity Wong

Age:	18
Interests:	Dancing, Make-up, Skincare, Vlogging
Star Sign:	Virgo
Talent:	Dancer – Ballet, Ballroom, Contemporary, Street
Best Friend:	Chloe Clark
Closest Connection:	Karim Malik (spotted Felicity's talent before she did!)
Ambition:	Professional Dancer & Influencer

Abeo Okon

Age:	17
Interests:	Fashion, Modelling, Luxury Magazines, Travelling

Star Sign:	Taurus
Talent:	Textile Arts, Modelling, Fashion Stylist & Trendsetter
Best Friend:	Karim Malik
Closest Connection:	James Sawyer (First Serious Relationship)
Ambition:	Fashion Designer

Sanjay Arya

Age:	17
Interests:	Visual Art, Conceptual Art, Galleries, Philosophy
Star Sign:	Pisces
Talent:	Painting, Drawing, Digital Art, Printmaking
Best Friend:	No one in Particular
Closest Connection:	Bit of a Loner (Karim practically invented Sanjay via The Exes)
Ambition:	Artist

A Sizzling Summer Secret Spilled: Terminating the Last Remnant of a Relationship . . .

August is the month Londoners make the most of our elusive sun before the sweet sting of autumn sweeps over. All notable influencers from St Victor's School (who aren't already off jet-setting in exotic locations) are either roaming Mayfair to revive their wardrobes (after all, only three days until school starts!), brunching

al fresco in Soho, or soaking up the sun in Hyde Park in their Alexander McQueen faille midi dresses and shorts that are trending this season (check my recent posts for Styling Tips and Who Wore It Best polls).

As for THE influencers – well, most of them have been surprisingly quiet as of recent. The Exes haven't spent much time together this summer; perhaps the tight-knit quintet needed a little space from each other? But don't worry – all the stuff they've failed to share online, I'll be a babe and dish out for them.

Felicity Wong has been pumping out dance and beauty content like never before on her TikTok – she's probably earned more than any other Ex this summer, and now officially has more followers on the app than anyone else in her clique (and in the country!). With the way her dance choreographies and East Asian skincare and make-up tutorials have been going viral recently, I can only see her following growing exponentially by the day, probably hour. Is she trying to outdo her fellow Exes? It's certainly working . . .

Abeo Okon has been shopping non-stop with his new beau and doesn't seem to mind spoiling him rotten. If the shelves at Hermès and Dior over on Bond Street look a little empty, now you know why. I must confess that Abeo may have inspired me to nab a few astonishingly colourful pieces from Versace; that man can style *anything*.

Rumour has it he's been approached by Burberry to model their upcoming collection. Now wouldn't that be iconic – something to keep your eyes peeled for . . .

Sanjay Arya has been holed up in his Notting Hill apartment/art studio: shirtless, cigarette in one hand, paintbrush in the other. It seems he's finally got the tortured artist look down to a T. Although he's shared some behind-the-scenes footage and glimpses of his artwork online (always with strange and deeply philosophical captions that no one seems to understand), most of it he's kept to himself. Is our famous teen artist already preparing his portfolio for university applications? Or perhaps he's planning to open his own gallery? Whatever you have to say about The Exes, you certainly can't say they lack ambition.

Now over to our fan favourites. It's been a whole month since our stellar couple posted anything on their socials, which, let's be honest, feels like *years* when it comes to them. Especially since they've always shared every single aspect of their relationship with us, leaving us screaming, 'Couple goals!' We aren't used to being stranded like this, Karim and Chloe! How rude. We thought we were a part of this relationship too *ugly crying face*.

Before their sudden disappearance, there were rumours about trouble in paradise, which rocked our world – we'd always thought the picture-perfect, lovesick couple

would eventually make their way down the aisle, have children, and grow old together. Shame on you for selling us false dreams about love, Chlarim!

Although the YouTubers seem to have decided to keep their relationship under wraps recently, there's no escaping the all-seeing gaze of Mr Ex, and you darlings better brace yourselves because I have some piping hot tea to spill. Now, here's the thing: I have good news *and* bad news. We'll start with the good, of course, because you know I like to leave you with a sizzling bang (not that kind, you saucy rascals).

Lovebirds Karim and Chloe were holidaying in the French Riviera, soaking up the sun and *each other* while taking endless romantic strolls around the picturesque towns and private beaches (shout-out to @allieinwonderland for sending in the photos. You guys always have my back!). Don't mind me while I wipe away my drool after taking in Karim's tanned and deliciously toned beach body. I think we can all agree it's the ultimate summer dream to lick ice cream off those abs. Chloe's tanned midriff on the other hand – well, that brings us over to the not-so-good news.

An anonymous yet trustworthy source has confirmed that the passionate lovemaking at their romantic retreat left Chloe feeling a little . . . bloated. The reason she was seen arriving at London City Airport alone, puffy-eyed

and red-faced, was . . . a positive pregnancy test. She has since been sighted at King Edward VII's Hospital and rumour has it she's chosen to go ahead with an abortion – the most surprising thing is that Karim is still nowhere in sight. I wonder what her Catholic parents will have to say about this. Talk about going straight from 'couple goals' to 'we're worried for your souls'!

Karim and Chloe have been in an on–off relationship for years, but they always, *always* find their way back to each other. If this relationship is truly over for good, what does it mean for The Exes? And, more importantly, what the hell does it mean for *us*? Even the thought of not seeing any more couples content from Chlarim gives me nausea – and I mean, worse than morning-sickness nausea. Should I give them a taste of their own medicine and stop posting about them for a while? They'll learn their lesson when they see the traffic on their platforms dwindling . . .

Heck, who am I kidding? Things are too juicy right now for me to go AWOL! Stay tuned for the latest news on the hottest kids in town!

Yours Unfaithfully,
Mr Ex



1

Gossip spreads like ink in water.

Sudden. Swift. Staining.

A single rumour has the power to change someone's reputation in a heartbeat.

'Some aunty caught her snogging a guy in his car,' Saliha whispered to me, lifting her chin in Hania's direction. We'd all secured summer jobs in Selfridges' beauty department, and Hania was working at the counter just opposite ours. 'Apparently they were in the Asda car park.'

Saliha snorted but my eyes instantly widened with worry.

'That is so messed up.'

My heart shuddered just thinking of all the ways Hania's relatives would be shaming her, how mortified she must be feeling and the endless gossip that would follow her. What bothered me the most about these rumours were the double standards – practically everyone in our community had spotted Hania's brothers with girls in the past and their parents probably hadn't even bothered to mention it once.

'Someone also sent Hania's mum screenshots from her private socials, and we've both seen how revealing those pics

are.' Saliha paused to raise her brows and then tucked a stray hair back into her hijab. 'I'm surprised she's even allowed to leave the house for work.'

I stared at Hania's red-rimmed eyes as she helped a customer.

Saliha laughed at my stricken expression. 'Obviously I feel sorry for her too, but we all know how risky stuff like that is in our community. She should've been more careful.'

'Should I let her know I'm here if she needs anything, or would that be weird since we don't really talk?'

Saliha grimaced. 'Definitely weird.'

'But isn't it worse to not say anything at all?'

'Do you *really* think she needs us, Zara?'

Hania was one of the most popular girls in our school. With her curvaceous figure, sleek black hair and doll-like features, she had everyone flocking around her like sheep.

'Guess not. I just hope she's doing OK.'

Saliha rolled her eyes. 'Everyone will move on when the aunties get hold of the next scandal. Do you reckon it was Imran she was caught with?'

I wrinkled my nose in distaste. With his temple fade trim, ear piercings and baggy tracksuits, my neighbour Imran Sayyid perfectly encapsulated the stereotypical 'rude-boy' image. He broke hearts left, right and centre, sometimes with as little as a wink.

As much as I tried to deny it, even I wasn't entirely immune to his charm. I'd had a crush on Imran in the past, but things were different now. Since turning seventeen, I was no longer fooled by the ridiculous bad-boy act. I was focused on getting

through my final year of sixth form and heading towards a brighter future.

Hania suddenly looked right at us and narrowed her eyes as though she knew we were talking about her. Awkward!

We leaped into action. Saliha tried to duck behind the counter, her head whacking into its corner, and I walked right into a customer, knocking the palette she was holding clean out of her hand. Bits of colourful, glittering powder scattered across the white marble floor.

'I am *so* sorry,' I exclaimed.

From the corner of my eye, I could see our manager death-glaring at us – an expression we were used to by now. I shrugged it off and began clearing up the mess. Just a few weeks ago, I would've been jittery for the rest of the day after receiving a look like that, but this job had helped me to come out of my shell, to realize that there was no pleasing some people and it wasn't worth feeling anxious over them.

It got busier. Packs of girls came and went, and they all seemed to blend into one . . .

The nineties flared jeans that were in again; Louis Vuitton Neverfulls; lip fillers from some place over on Harley Street; long hair with summery highlights done at hairdressers in Fitzrovia.

When things quietened, Saliha approached me with a mischievous look. 'Oh my God. I forgot to ask if you've read Mr Ex's latest post.'

I'd recently broken the habit of opening social media first thing in the morning, so I wasn't up to speed. With school starting soon, I didn't want to be glued to my phone, and it

had taken everything in me to keep myself from being hooked on the one site that everyone at school checked regularly: Mr Expose's blog.

Mr Ex always had the juiciest gossip!

He exposed secrets about the top influencers in London that we all loved to watch, and he didn't spare the details.

His main victims were The Exes: the five teenagers who collectively ran one of the biggest YouTube channels in Britain. It was common knowledge that they'd chosen the name 'The Exes' to convey how quickly they moved on from styles, lovers, locations and scandals.

Although they do possess some talent, The Exes are basically just famous for being famous. They post silly pranks, daily vlogs and plenty of couples content.

They first went viral with the vlogs of their lives at St Victor's, an exclusive private school in West London, attended by the privileged kids of London's elite. I enjoyed watching their antics when I was younger, before I realized these were the people I'd be competing with for a space at a top university. They'd got a head start with all their years of a top-tier private education and the bank of mum and dad at their disposal. I'd have to work twice as hard to get the grades and opportunities that just fell into their laps.

From the moment The Exes entered the scene, they took the internet by storm. Their refined accents, lavish lifestyle, glitzy panache – it was as though the world had been waiting for them.

Saliha came up close, interrupting my thoughts. 'Apparently Chloe Clark just aborted Karim Malik's baby.'

I gave her a sceptical look.

'Oh there's evidence . . . photos of her leaving the hospital!' she exclaimed.

'That doesn't really prove anything,' I scoffed. 'It could've been for a blood test or practically anything else. Besides, a girl getting an abortion should *not* be the town's gossip. Like ever.'

Sal pursed her lips. 'Well, it's already out there now. And I doubt Mr Ex would post about it if he didn't have at least one reliable source.'

My brows shot together. 'Oh yeah, because British tabloids and gossip blogs share nothing but the *gospel truth*. We're literally in the era of fake news. And it's insensitive of Mr Ex to blast something like that if it *is* true – just imagine what state Chloe and Karim must be in.'

'They were together for such a long time,' Saliha continued, looking into space thoughtfully. 'I can't even picture them with other people. If they split for good, it's going to change The Exes forever.'

'I can't even imagine how Chloe must be feeling. Imagine every aspect of your relationship being available to the public! We're talking about an entirely different level of gossip here. I'd never survive – the whole world watching and judging my most intimate decisions.'

A shudder ran through me at the mere thought of it. My parents' judgements were distressing enough without the thought of my peers, the wider community or random trolls on the internet chipping in as well.

Sal's eyes widened. 'Can you imagine if this kind of news broke out among the aunties in our area?' She sniggered into her hand. 'They can't even handle bare shoulders and stolen

kisses. They'd have a collective heart attack and be holding on to their dupattas for dear life.'

It seemed that even if you were incredibly rich and beloved, you couldn't escape the unfair expectations that society placed on girls and their bodies. I let out a sad sigh.

'Relax, Zara. These people live in a very different world from us. Scandalous news is normal for them. They choose to put themselves out there, and they know this comes with the territory.'

'They're human too!' I retorted. 'I know Mr Ex can be funny, but sometimes he's just plain awful. If the abortion news is true, he's provoking his hordes of followers to harass them on top of everything else they're going through. The Exes' comment sections must be looking unhinged right now.'

Saliha snorted. 'Oh honey, but that's how you know you've made it these days – when you've got haters. Just so long as you're still hustling from the hype. I'm gonna be that kind of a hustler someday. You just wait and see.'

Social media stardom really did seem to be the dream for everyone I knew these days. It was something I never really understood.

But in Saliha's case, with her sassy personality, soft Bangladeshi features and incredible modest fashion sense, I didn't doubt that she would one day realize her dream. Her Instagram had recently hit five thousand followers. She was even making some sales from driving her internet traffic to a website she'd set up called Saliha's Style, which sold jersey hijabs.

'Yup, just a few more crazy clickbait YouTube videos and you'll be up there with The Exes,' I replied sarcastically.

She glared at me for a whole two seconds before we could no longer hold our laughter in, mostly because I knew we were both thinking about her latest video, 'Super Spicy Noodles Mukbang'. After uploading it she'd glumly stated that two thousand views hadn't been worth practically burning her insides and prancing around like an idiot in pain for an hour.

'The Exes may use a lot of filters,' Saliha said. 'But you can't fake everything. The money, the travelling, the freedom. It *is* real. They get to shop rather than work here. Don't you want to know what it's like to have all of that?'

'Sure,' I murmured.

I'd imagined countless times what it would be like to be an Ex. Those daydreams of perpetual banter, romance and travelling had provided the perfect temporary escape from the suffocating reality of my home life, where I could never really let loose.

'Oh, another key piece of evidence,' Sal added smugly. 'Karim Malik hasn't posted anything on his socials in over a month. Now we all know why.'

My heart fluttered at the mention of him.

I'd certainly missed his presence on my feed these past few weeks. Karim Malik was so charming that I felt myself blush every time I watched his videos. As embarrassing as it was to admit it, I'd had my fair share of fantasies about him, like pretty much every other teenage girl who'd seen him online. He was even my screensaver at one point; when Mum had seen it, she'd said it was inappropriate and made me change it.

Saliha, on the other hand, was obsessed with Chloe Clark's style. When Chloe started wearing a classic pearl necklace, so

did Sal. Even I felt the urge to grab one. I made a mental note to have a look in a high street jewellery store when I was paid at the end of the month. Anything from Selfridges would be out of my budget.

The Exes were leading all the current trends in fashion, beauty, lifestyle, content creation and everything in between. It was impossible to get away from the power of their influence, and by the time you managed to hop on to the latest trend, the next one was already in full swing.

When Mr Expose's blog had first gone viral, everyone had assumed he was connected to The Exes in some way, but it quickly became obvious that he was just an anonymous blogger with a similar name, who had a flair for dissecting their outfits, talents and lives.

Mr Ex immediately captured everyone's attention with his sassy and scathing exposés of the country's 'it' crowd.

Everyone wondered why The Exes even allowed Mr Ex's gossip blog to keep running. They were the children of England's elite, so surely they could have had it taken down with one phone call if they'd wanted to? Then the darker rumours began: people were convinced The Exes were staging the entire thing and running the blog themselves, doing it for publicity and views.

It wouldn't be the strangest thing someone had done in the cause of social media success. And it certainly made sense. How else would Mr Ex be getting access to all those private photos, videos and conversations? He seemed to know the most intimate details . . .

'Any new theories on who Mr Ex might be?' I whispered to Sal.

'Didn't you just say he's awful?' she quipped.

'Even though he's a feisty blabbermouth, he has a way of getting under your skin,' I admitted reluctantly.

Sal kissed her teeth. 'I'm sick of running around in circles with my ludicrous theories. But I'd bet all my scanty savings that Mr Ex is one of The Exes, most likely Abeo Okon – can't you just imagine him doing Mr Ex's voice perfectly? Anyways, I hope the snitch fesses up soon so I can shout *I told you so* from London's rooftops. You'll definitely have to help me capture that for my YouTube.'

The elusive, most-followed UK gossip blogger was so good at being anonymous that it seemed no one would know their identity until they chose to unveil it themselves, which they might never even do. And there was certainly no way of us knowing what *really* went on behind the scenes in the lives of the scandalous quintet. What we did know, however, was that The Exes were swiftly becoming the biggest influencers in the world, with the power to set and destroy trends with more sway than any celebrity.

Regardless of the rumours that spread about them, they would never really be harmed, because they'd already made it. All the world's luxuries and opportunities lay at their feet.

They were untouchable, happy, *free*.

Saliha was right.

I *did* want to know what it was like to have all of that.



2

Gossip doesn't bother me.

I was raised in it, surrounded by it before I even understood what my family name meant to others. The Maliks are known to be dashingly desirable, indecently rich, proudly intimidating.

We're the exclusive tea everyone wants a sip of, and, of course, everything people are too afraid to say directly to us is said behind our backs. But the hype only adds to our image and wealth, so we welcome it.

Whispers follow me everywhere I go, and I thrive despite them – *because* of them. I smile, wave, pose for selfies, all the while watching my social media accounts boom and the money roll in. All the while seeing my parents' businesses flourish and expand.

It's a good life.

Well, that's what I tell myself – it's the only way to survive the reality of being Karim Malik.

Behind the mask, the truth is that . . . this recent gossip feels different.

More personal. Sinister. In a way that makes me question the intentions of every single person I've ever met – even those

I've known for years. People are somehow getting their hands on deeply private information about me – the stuff I wouldn't even share with some of my closest confidants – and plastering it on the internet or, more likely, selling it to Mr Ex.

This gossip makes me feel paranoid and sick and drained.

I stopped reading the comments hours ago, but somehow the nasty remarks still drift in my mind. I need to talk this through with one of my friends.

But is there anyone I can truly confide in?

How do I know who I can trust?

I'll probably never confide in anyone about this, just like I never spoke to anyone about all the other emotions fluttering inside me, contained like moths in a sealed jar.

The loneliness was eating away at me.

It felt embarrassing to admit that I was so lonely; no one would believe me anyway because of who I am and all that I have.

But there was a gaping hole in my life that no amount of money, fame or respect could fill. A hole that seemed to be growing by the day, slowly swallowing me into its dark mouth.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a meaningful conversation with anyone. I couldn't remember the last time I'd showered, shaved, or even brushed my teeth. Had it been three days? A week? Time had lost all meaning, as had most other things.

Today was different though. I could no longer refuse to 'do life'. I had a meeting with the other Exes, one that would shape our future as a brand, as individuals, and, most importantly, as friends.

As I lay in bed wondering how the meeting would go, Mum rushed in and went straight for my floor-length curtains, sweeping them back. I groaned as the light flooded in and flung an arm over my eyes.

'Get up and get ready – you're going to meet your future sister-in-law today,' she announced. The hint of a Pakistani accent underlying her posh London enunciation was more prominent than usual; it intensified when she was stressed.

'Urgh. Mum!'

'It's afternoon, for God's sake. Get up and make yourself look decent, Karim. Today's food tasting with the Qureshis is important.'

Everyone at home had been going on about the wedding for a while now, but I hadn't given it much thought. The Qureshis, my brother's soon-to-be in-laws, had flown in from Lahore just yesterday, and my family had gone to the airport to pick them up. After dining at The Ritz, they'd dropped them off at their home in Bishops Avenue. I was the only one who had yet to meet my brother's fiancée and her family. Mum had complained that my absence had looked bad, and I knew she wouldn't let me off the hook today. Out the corner of my eye, I watched her come over and stand at the foot of my bed and then place her hands on her hips.

'Hai!' she cried suddenly.

I shot up in bed, rubbing the sleep from my left eye. 'What's wrong?'

'Your grimy socks just touched my feet,' she declared, a hand shooting to her head in distress.

It was common for Mum to be this theatrical – to act as though any dirty items around the house somehow came to life in her presence and were on a mission to get her. Even after seventeen years of living with her, I fell for it every time. I relaxed back into bed, grumbling irritably.

'Oh, the smell in here,' she continued. 'I'll have one of the maids place some diffusers around the room. Would you prefer Fresh Fig & Cassis or English Pear & Freesia?'

When I didn't respond, she continued speaking to herself. 'English Pear it is.'

She nodded as though she'd just made an incredibly important decision. When she looked at me again, a flicker of concern was present in her eyes. Had it not been for the Botox, creases of worry might've formed along her forehead.

'Do we need to book in a few sessions with your therapist?'

It was the way Maliks dealt with all problems: throwing money at them. We rarely spoke to each other about anything meaningful – we were all too busy wrapped up in our own lives. Speaking to a therapist could be helpful, but only if you told them the truth . . .

There was no way Mum had missed the news about the abortion; it was trending everywhere. But she'd likely assumed it was all fake gossip, as a lot of the other stuff turned out to be, not even worthy of being addressed. My parents didn't make time for me in their hectic schedules unless it was a life-or-death situation, and clearly this didn't cut it.

'No,' I grunted, pushing the duvet away. 'I'm fine. I was just about to shower.'

Now that I took her in properly, I realized how glamorous she looked. While I was in my room wasting away, her skin was glowing in a way that made her look half her age. She was wearing a floor-length silver gown encrusted with fine crystals and pearls. It was no doubt one of her own pieces; she was the owner of the world-renowned luxury Pakistani fashion brand Fouzia Faris, named after herself. The designer evening wear and bridal couture had carved its way into being a top choice for influential international shoppers, celebrities and brides. Visitor slots at our flagship store on Regent Street were always fully booked.

'Your father and I are heading out for afternoon tea with Sana and her family, but we'll be back soon. I need you to be present and on your best behaviour today. OK?'

'So, with Sana . . .' I began awkwardly, unsure of how to refer to the girl from Pakistan who my parents had arranged to marry my older brother.

'You'll be expected to refer to her as Sana *baji*,' Mum said, a touch sharply.

I didn't even refer to my own older sister with such formality and respect, but I nodded in agreement.

'Does Sana baji speak English?'

My Urdu was appalling, so we wouldn't have much in the way of communication if she didn't.

Mum sighed dramatically, raising a hand as though she simply couldn't bear to hear me say another word.

'You've spent far too many of your summer holidays jet-setting with your friends. If you'd agreed to come on at least one family trip to Pakistan in the last six years, you'd have

known the answer to that. And you'd certainly know a lot more about what your community is like in your motherland.'

She made to leave the room.

'You still haven't answered my question.'

'It was a stupid one,' she responded over her shoulder as she left.

Just as I stood and stretched, my sister strolled in.

'Urgh. The entire house smells of curry. With the amount of wedding caterers we've invited over today, it'll be a while before the smell goes away.'

In a sleeveless grey kurta from Fouzia Faris, Kiran looked great too and I suddenly felt even worse about my messy state. Just like our mother, she had an incredible eye for fashion; I usually asked her to accompany me when I met with designers and stylists for important red-carpet events. But that was also because I genuinely enjoyed her company, and I was much closer to her than to our older brother, Azad.

'Absolutely ridiculous,' she said, sitting at the edge of my bed and holding her phone up in my direction.

Staring back from the screen was a brown-skinned man with a large round face. He was wearing horn-rimmed glasses and had a rather bushy moustache.

'It's Sana's older brother. According to mum, he's a real catch. I think she's hoping to kill two birds with one stone and get me married off too.'

Kiran fake-retched.

'Did she give you any further details about him?' I asked.

'He's a well-established businessman in America apparently. Not that I care or want to know because I can't seem to get

over his monobrow, which is like half his face. And the other half . . . well, let's just say I wish the monobrow and moustache were large enough to cover that too.'

I burst out laughing. And suddenly I regretted pushing her away for the past few weeks. Although there was a lot I couldn't speak to my older sister about, I felt less lonely with her around. 'I can't believe Mum thought you'd actually agree to *that*.'

'What *I* can't believe,' she said curiously, 'is that Azad agreed to an arranged marriage with someone from Pakistan. Would *you* ever do it?'

We locked eyes for a moment, then simultaneously snorted. With the kind of lifestyles we lived, it was unlikely that either of us would ever agree to an arranged marriage. Even the idea of someone else choosing one of our meals or outfits was unacceptable to us, let alone choosing our *life partner*. Azad was more traditional in his ways and closer to our parents. Kiran and I were the opinionated younger siblings who did our own thing and drove them slightly mad.

'Is it a full-on arranged thing?' I mused.

Kiran's brows shot up. 'Did you not ask him? He's your brother too.'

'I've been busy. Besides, you know how private he is.'

'Mum introduced them. They've been speaking for close to a year now. Azad had multiple business visits to Lahore, and they met up every time he was there. It may have been arranged to start with, but now it's something more.'

'Wow,' I replied. 'It seems everything worked out perfectly for him because Mum meddled in his love life.'

Kiran pouted. 'I'm next in line, now that I'm turning twenty-five, and practically past my shelf date according to everyone. Let's hope Mum doesn't try to dictate my marriage too. I could never deal with it. Too many prying aunties.'

'Who knows, it may be your only option,' I teased.

She showed me her middle finger.

I headed towards my walk-in wardrobe to pick something out. Every suit was ironed, scented and hung perfectly.

'What shall I wear?' I asked Kiran, who followed me in and settled into the bronze Casa Padrino baroque sofa. She used to spend hours seated right there, curled into its arm as we exchanged stories about our lives. I'd missed this.

'A black Tom Ford suit.'

'Hmm,' I grunted nonchalantly, even as I did exactly as she said.

Suit in hand, I turned to face her and saw pity in her eyes.

'Please don't,' I snapped. 'I'm not in the mood to talk about it.'

Kiran adjusted her dark hair around her pale face and gave me a concerned look that was identical to Mum's. She looked so much like our Pakistani mother, who was from Peshawar and Lahore. I, on the other hand, was told time and time again how much I resembled our Indian father, with his rich brown skin and sharply defined jawline. He was from Hyderabad, but he'd been born and raised in England and didn't have the same attachment to his heritage as Mum did. I related to him in that sense.

'Are you seriously going to walk on eggshells around me all day?'

'No, of course not,' she said unconvincingly, then sighed. 'It's just a difficult situation to be in. It was hard enough to deal with it in private, and now everyone knows.'

'I'm fine.'

'Have your PR team told you what to do?'

'Same protocol as always. Don't address the issue at all. Apparently it'll blow over just like everything else in the past.'

'It will,' Kiran declared, walking over to me. 'You know how quickly things move on the internet. Today is a day for family; I don't want you stressing about anything else.'

'But first I'm going to meet The Exes. We have things to discuss.'

'Now? You need to be here when the Qureshis arrive!'

'Don't worry, I'll be back in time,' I said impatiently, and raised my suit suggestively. 'Now if you don't mind, I'm going to change.'

When Kiran reached the door, she turned around to give me one last worried look before leaving.

It had been a while since I'd posted anything on my socials, and I knew my self-imposed sabbatical had gone on for far too long. It was time to get back to work. Even though I wasn't in the mood for it, I pulled out my phone and set it on a tripod to record a transformation video. I chose the new Stormzy song that was trending and recorded myself lip-syncing to the opening lines.

I wondered if anyone would be able to tell just how fake and forced my smile was. Well, they'd never been able to tell before, so the answer to that was a solid *no*.

After a quick shower and clean-shave, I donned my suit, ditching the tie and leaving the top two buttons undone. I attached silver cufflinks, clipped my Rolex on and ran a touch of organic honey-scented wax through my hair. I usually spent more time smoothing it out, creating my signature sleek Ivy League look, but I couldn't be bothered today.

I recorded the rest of the video and uploaded it without checking it through. I'd been creating content since I was thirteen; it was muscle memory now.

As I descended the grand staircase from the third floor, I stopped to take a few selfies for my Instagram story. They came out nice enough that I decided to upload one on to my feed as well.

Caption – *My sister was right. Our house smells of curry, but I kinda like it . . .*

I tagged Kiran in the post, knowing she'd appreciate the traffic. My account had hit twenty million followers recently.

When I reached the landing, I called to one of the butlers, 'You're driving me out. Grab the keys for the Cadillac. Alert the bodyguards too.'

I stepped out to find the London sky a bright, promising blue. The late-August sun instantly cast a warm glow over me. This kind of weather was rare enough that I usually savoured it, felt my spirit instantly rise with the heat, but not today.

My family's presence was the reason all the other dwellers of Upper Phillimore Gardens in Kensington had had to revamp their security systems. No paparazzi were allowed anywhere near this block. It was comforting to see the Malik

family home, Number 5, loom tall and steady before me. It was a detached ten-bedroom, white stucco-fronted Victorian townhouse – classic.

This was my safe space.

Although I had security to keep unwanted people out of my life here, I knew that the moment I was sighted outside, the swarms would rush over, shoving and screaming and leaching.

I could already envision all the commotion along Oxford Street: the camera flashes that would leave me seeing double; the shouting that would sink into my mind; the crowd pushing to get closer and closer.

When the butler opened the car door and I settled into the warm red leather, the nerves kicked in. As The Exes, we had experienced our fair share of intense meetings over the years, but never over something like this: a secret with the power to break us apart.

A secret that was no longer a secret.

'Sir?'

'Selfridges,' I ordered.

As we got closer, my heart pounded.

On the outside, I appeared calm, collected. But on the inside, I felt anxious and exhausted. I caught sight of a random guy – grey backpack, rimless glasses, carefree grin – hopping on to a double-decker bus with a friend, lost in their conversation, utterly uninterested in the rush surrounding them.

I wondered what it would be like to be him.



3

The last hour of my shift passed agonizingly slowly, filled with forced smiles, repetitive conversations, a mind-numbing monotony.

I shuffled closer to Sal.

'I want to keep this job on weekends after school starts. Do you?'

'No way,' she replied, cocking a perfectly painted brow. 'This year's going to be tough. We need our weekends to revise, don't we?'

I didn't bother to respond.

She was right. But this job was my excuse to spend as little time at home as possible. Before I'd taken it, I'd never really been allowed out much. All my childhood memories were of being at home, doing homework, trying to get my two older siblings to let me play with them, and helping my mum around the house while we waited for Dad to come back from his shifts as a taxi driver.

Working here was my escape.

I finally had the freedom to explore the city I was born and raised in, yet still barely even knew. The commotion in

Leicester Square, the glittering lights of Piccadilly Circus, the street performers of Covent Garden . . . I wanted to experience all of it.

Money was the only reason Dad had agreed to let me take this job. This would be the hardest and most crucial year of my education, and although I always got high grades, the teaching at my state school wasn't very good; since I was competing with the smartest students in the country to study dentistry at uni, I wasn't going to risk it. I needed extra tuition classes in A-level maths, biology and chemistry to ensure I got the best grades I could manage. And tuition was *expensive*.

Becoming a dentist was something I'd been striving for ever since I met Aunty Seema at a wedding in my local community. I was fourteen and it was the first time I'd come across a woman so educated, eloquent and independent. She owned her own dental clinic, and her self-assurance was apparent in the way she carried herself and communicated with her husband and children. She was her own boss in every way, and everyone respected her for it, including my mum and her friends, even if they secretly judged her western clothing and modern lifestyle behind her back.

After meeting her, the seed of inspiration had taken root and never withered. *That* was the kind of future I wanted for myself.

I didn't feel comfortable asking my parents for money. This job was a better solution because I enjoyed being independent, and it wasn't something I would ever give up. Especially after seeing everything my sister was dealing with in her marriage.

'This was just supposed to be a summer thing,' Sal continued disapprovingly. 'If you carry on working on weekends, how will we find time to do our study sessions?'

'Don't worry, we'll still be study buddies,' I assured her. 'Our revision sessions are a necessity.'

'For *me*, not for you. You're the smartest girl in school. You'll get into whatever uni you apply to.'

'That's not true.' I was being humble – I knew full well that I was a top student in our school.

'Seriously though, you're an actual geek. I know it's important that we get into our dream unis but it's just as important to make memories in our last year of school together. We can't forget to have fun!'

'We won't,' I promised.

Saliha was my favourite person, the only one I confided in and really laughed with. I had other friends, but no one I hung out with outside of school. Of course, that was mostly because of all the curfews my parents enforced, but Mum never really seemed to mind much when I asked to go over to Saliha's. As rebellious as Sal was, she knew exactly how to behave whenever any elders were around. It really was an art.

We'd been best friends for as long as I could remember because we'd grown up together. We'd attended the same primary and secondary school, mosque lessons, and now sixth form too. While Saliha was a total extrovert, I was the quiet one who never let people get too close.

A large part of the reason Saliha and I had such different personalities despite our many shared experiences was the way we'd been raised. We'd been next-door neighbours for over ten

years, and while her home was always full of people and laughter and love, mine was quiet. Strained.

'Do you want to do something after work?' Sal called to me while cleaning foundation smudges off the counter. 'The weather's amazing.'

I was searching our stock for a concealer shade but paused to give Sal an apologetic look. 'I wish I could, but I'm seeing my brother after work. He needs help with something.'

When we had mere minutes of our shift left to kill, I heard a shriek from our manager. Amy was usually as devoid of emotion as a zombie, so Sal and I exchanged a concerned look.

'Some of The Exes have just been spotted here,' she announced, radiating the air of someone brave enough to spill a state secret.

My stomach did a strange tumble.

Of course I knew The Exes also lived in London, but their London usually seemed to exist in a different dimension to mine. Even working at a luxury store like Selfridges, I'd never seen an Ex in person before. I locked eyes with Saliha, and we flew to each other like magnets.

My insides buzzed with excitement. These people seemed more dream than reality. I'd watched their videos for years, and now there was a chance I would see them in the flesh. It felt surreal.

As a large, noisy crowd spilled into our department, all the staff stopped working and either stared at the incoming mass of people or had their phones ready to capture some footage of what was going on.

'I think I see Karim,' Saliha hissed fervently, pointing ahead.

I looked to where she was gesturing.

It *was* Karim Malik.

The most handsome, charming Ex. The screams were ear-piercing as people flocked all around him. Through the dense crowd, I caught glimpses of him with stern security officers on either side.

To my astonishment, he didn't look like . . . himself. Sure, he was still the sleek, gorgeous raven-haired guy I was used to seeing online, but something felt wrong. He had an intense grimace on his face, as though he was fed up with the world, and there were dark circles bruising the area around his eyes.

He looked utterly sick of the cameras, the people, the hysteria.

Saliha readied her iPhone camera as he passed by.

A girl ran through our make-up counter in an attempt to reach him, probably to nab a selfie. She managed to grab his arm for a second before one of his bodyguards scooped her up and hauled her back.

Karim scowled at the girl, and then glanced a little to his side. I was directly in his line of sight.

OMG, this is the moment I've been waiting for! Is he looking at me?

His eyes met mine and . . .

Anger. Annoyance. Disgust.

I flinched.

The world moved on swiftly, bodies and colours swirling so rapidly I blinked to clear the fuzz from my brain.

It was all over within a heartbeat, but I couldn't seem to draw breath. The moment was stamped on to my mind, where I knew it would remain, probably forever.

Karim Malik, the subject of so much of my attention, had looked at me as though I was . . . trash.

He'd likely already forgotten my face; I was just another girl among the overbearing masses fawning over him. This encounter was a profound reminder of how big and powerful he was and how small and insignificant I was.

I had never before felt so conscious of my appearance, my ordinariness, my non-existent social status.

I had never before felt so worthless.



4

The rush was maddening.

It was quieter on the top floor, and I could finally breathe. I brushed away the bodyguards, making it clear I was going to enter alone. I walked into Alto by San Carlo, the rooftop bar and restaurant – our favourite spot at Selfridges.

The chatter and laughter instantly evaporated to an awkward silence. I didn't bother to greet them, only offered a quick analytical glance at their outfits, all carefully chosen to garner attention and set trends.

Ozwald Boateng blazers. Vivienne Westwood shirts and dresses. Alexander McQueen scarves. Multiple items of jewellery gracing their necks and fingers. Earth-toned Mulberry bags resting in their laps or at their feet.

Everything they wore was likely gifted. My delivery room was probably brimming with similar pieces, but I hadn't checked it this month. My mind was elsewhere.

Although the entire restaurant had been cleared for us, we weren't really alone. We were never really alone any more. I couldn't remember the last time I felt it was just us Exes together – not now that we always had our phones in hand,

exploiting every moment and posting it for millions to gorge on.

'Why did you choose to meet here?' I challenged the group.

No one responded. It was an accusation more than a question.

'This conversation should take place away from the spotlight. In utter privacy, where we can be completely *honest*.' I emphasized the last word while looking at Chloe.

She suddenly found her French manicure rather interesting.

'Clearly there's a snitch with easy access to us,' Felicity answered tensely. 'It could be one of our cleaners. Or partners. Mr Ex seems to have plenty of snitches in his pocket. At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if he's inserted hidden cameras and microphones around our homes.'

'A random, last-minute location was our best bet for privacy,' Abeo added.

I pulled up a chair and got comfortable, leaning back and taking a moment to enjoy the London skyline the restaurant offered.

My entire life was in walking distance from here: my school, where I lived, the places that carried my most profound memories and secrets.

This was home.

But London was also beginning to feel like a stranger, always shifting and mutating, refusing to stay stable for even a moment. My city was the lover I couldn't figure out: sometimes I woke to tenderness and warm kisses, other times to a cold, empty bed.

When I turned back to the group again, they swiftly stopped exchanging loaded glances. I relished their muteness,

their confusion at what to say or do. It was a pleasant change from their usual overconfident, carefree manner.

It would be an understatement to say I felt left out these days, so it was good to watch them squirm under the scrutiny of my gaze. Ironic, really: they were completely fine with having the world watch every aspect of their lives, and yet a single look from me had them reeling.

The Exes.

Chloe Clark. Abeo Okon. Felicity Wong. Sanjay Arya.

My best friends, occasionally my worst enemies.

'So calling a meeting here has nothing to do with the hype of us being spotted together in public after Mr Ex's latest post?' I asked sarcastically.

Abeo splayed his hands on either side of his blazer and waggled his fingers enthusiastically. 'Fair enough. I just couldn't bear the thought of not being papped in today's outfit. They always get the best candid photos for the gram.'

Felicity snorted and Abeo chuckled. But after seeing my expression, they swiftly suppressed their humour.

'What?' Abeo asked defensively. 'I like making sure my feed is fed.' He crossed his arms, his biceps straining the sleeves of his blazer. 'Besides, this is our job. It's what we do.' He looked right at me as he finished with, 'You're the one who told us to always think about business first if we want to become the best in the game.'

This was one of the things I admired most about Abeo. He could switch from being cheeky to discussing serious business in a heartbeat; he was the perfect influencer.

It was the truth. I had once said that. And meant it.

The social media space was competitive, with fresh talent popping up every day. We followed a set of rules to ensure we continued to grow the platforms we'd carved for ourselves.

Sunlight glinted off Sanjay's gold earring, and my eyes settled on its subtle, elegant *Exes* logo.

One of the rules was that whenever we were in public, regardless of the event, we'd wear at least one item from our own brand; it was the most natural and powerful way to drive sales. Today, I had worn our cufflinks, Felicity had chosen our white satin headband, Chloe our pearl necklace, Abeo our silk pocket square and Sanjay one of our earrings.

Chloe sighed and then said, 'Can we stop overanalysing things? We chose to meet here because we were in the mood for some nice drinks, seafood and a much-needed catch-up.'

I wish you'd be in the mood for some honesty occasionally, I wanted to hiss at her.

There was a lot I wanted to say to her, but I couldn't. Not right now, not when everything was still so fragile between us. A sarcastic retort was bubbling at the tip of my tongue, so I looked down at the food instead, trying to control my breathing.

There was a charcuterie board displaying an assortment of cheeses, marinated cured meats and Italian bread. The seafood platter was filled with rock oysters, tempura prawns and soft-shell crab.

My stomach clenched with hunger but the mere thought of consuming any of it made me nauseous.

'Look, Karim,' Abeo said impatiently, running a hand over his short-cropped Afro. 'It's time for us to start planning this

month's content. We want you to be present in our videos again.'

I'd missed this – making plans with The Exes. I looked at Abeo, taking in his mahogany skin and full lips. He was the son of a British Nigerian businessman involved in property development throughout the UK and West Africa. His mother was an artist from France, and traces of a French accent occasionally peeked through when he spoke. His style was certainly a mixture of all these influences and gave him a sophisticated, alluring charm.

'Maybe it's time to take a step back,' I replied in a tired tone, 'and think about the direction we're all heading in.'

Abeo scoffed. 'The direction is obviously thirty million subscribers. We're only off by three million.'

It was a relief his clingy boyfriend, James Sawyer, wasn't there to egg him on as usual; I could almost hear him echo *thirty million subscribers* in the background for dramatic effect. They'd been joined at the hip ever since they started going out, and James simply tried too hard to be accepted as one of us, to be popular and seen. It was exhausting to witness, doomed as he was to fail.

For there could be no more Exes.

That was at least one thing we all still agreed on. Perhaps one of the only things.

'I'm sure you can all understand that I need a break. Especially since Mr Ex just posted about the abortion.'

I watched their expressions tighten as I finally brought up the issue more openly.

Chloe looked out the window, her nostrils flaring a touch. Her long blonde hair framed her in perfect sun-kissed waves. She always looked modelesque and camera-ready. I had once admired that about her. Now it only made me want to shake some sense into her, to tell her to let go sometimes, to stop caring so much about the stuff that didn't matter as much as the stuff that *did*.

When she turned back to us, she looked straight at me, her bright green eyes somewhat glassy. There were so many times I had run my fingers through her hair, across her lips, over her skin. But now the mere thought of any of that set me on edge.

'How did the news of the abortion leak?' Chloe whispered, her barely audible voice empty of its soft, melodious lilt for once. 'Only *we* knew.'

The Exes eyed each other suspiciously.

I analysed Chloe's expression.

A small, sickened part of me had thought that perhaps she'd been the one to tell Mr Ex. It would certainly keep her in the spotlight for a couple of weeks, right when she was trying to kickstart her singing career.

The tortured look on her face . . . no, it couldn't have been her.

But there were so many times I'd watched Chloe lie to Felicity about her whereabouts when we'd first started dating and wanted to keep it on the down-low. She'd been so convincing that even *I'd* almost believed she'd been enjoying family time the night before and not making out in bed with me.

'I didn't say anything to anyone,' Sanjay declared.

Felicity looked Chloe right in the eye as she said, 'Neither did I.'

It had never been this explicit – our suspicions of one another, the lack of trust between us.

'Obviously it was me then,' Abeo said with a manic smile.

'This is not the time to be sarcastic,' Sanjay replied.

Felicity sighed heavily as she took out a bottle of white nail polish from her handbag and began applying it to her thumb. 'I think it's stupid to start pointing fingers at each other.' Sanjay eyed her distraction distastefully and she shrugged. 'What? It's chipped in some places.'

I snapped. 'What the fuck is wrong with us? Are we incapable of having a single serious conversation about a very serious thing?'

Felicity snorted loudly. I gave her a death stare. She blew once over her polish and held her hands up in defence. 'I'm so sorry. Laughing at the worst times is basically my coping mechanism.'

Chloe smacked the table with a fist, making us all jump. 'I wish I hadn't told any of you about the abortion.'

I could feel the rage twisting on my face and didn't try to hide it. The fact that she'd told me *after* she'd done it . . . that she had almost decided not to tell me at all, had said that it was her body, her choice . . .

She had assumed I'd try to convince her to keep it, leading her to end her singing career before it had even taken off. She didn't even give me a chance to prove her wrong. I was still coming to terms with it all. She'd made so many assumptions about me, about us. I didn't think I'd ever be able to forgive her.

'If we're the only ones who knew,' I replied with deathly calm, 'then one of us five is a mole. Or one of us told someone else who can't be trusted.'

'I constantly feel *watched*, and not in a good way,' Sanjay said darkly, a stroke of sunlight suddenly streaming across his rich brown skin. 'There's stuff I haven't shared with anyone that's been posted on his blog. How the hell does he get access to it? Do you think he has people stalking us around the clock? Is he hacking our phones?'

Felicity's fingers tapped the table impatiently. 'I feel it too. I don't know whether it's just the fans being everywhere we go, but I always feel stalked.'

Silence.

Chloe combed through her hair with her pale, slender fingers. 'Whoever Mr Ex is, he definitely goes to our school. If we trace everything right back to the beginning, the way he described things in his earliest posts – where we eat, our classes, the events we attend – these aren't things he could have learned through watching our videos. He's from *our crowd*.'

Abeo nodded in agreement. 'And if we don't identify and stop him soon, he could really mess things up for us.'

'His recent posts are ruthless, and we're starting to lose money.' Felicity sulked. 'Two American brand deals have fallen through because of this . . . abortion controversy.'

I exhaled. 'Just imagine if the other stuff starts getting out.'

We sat in silence as the gravity of the situation settled in our minds. We all had our secrets. Plenty of them. Many which we hadn't even shared with each other.

Just a few months ago, Abeo and I had caught an early flight back from a brand event in Italy. We'd headed straight to his for a late-night swim only to walk in on his father relaxing in the jacuzzi with a naked woman who looked young enough to hang out with us. Abeo had told me to keep my mouth shut and we'd never spoken of it again. As an only child, he'd always been close to his parents; he'd never want his mum to find out, for his picture-perfect family to break apart.

As for Chloe, as well-established as her family were in England, they had relatives in Scotland who were still gang members, involved in the distribution of drugs throughout the country. The truth was that her roots were inextricably linked to that world; it was how the Clarks had amassed enough money to leave Glasgow and relocate to the heart of London in the first place.

Moving on to Felicity, the dance choreography she was *known* for, the very thing that had caused her TikTok to blow up, had been copied (albeit with slight alterations) from a dance group with a smaller platform. They'd tried to kick up a fuss to get credit for the dance routine, but their platform simply wasn't big enough to draw attention. Since then, Felicity had worked hard on creating original dance moves, but if people knew she'd stolen her most popular ones, they'd question everything she'd ever put out there.

And finally, Sanjay. During a stupid, drunken dare game a year ago, he had broken into our head teacher's garage and set his car on fire. The fire had spread to his house, where his wife and three children were sleeping. The fire brigade had come in time, no one had been injured, but the loss had been significant

enough that if Sanjay was ever exposed as having been the culprit, he'd likely find himself expelled, unwanted in any other school, and possibly even imprisoned.

If Mr Ex got a whiff of any of this, if he exposed it online . . .

There was far too much at risk for all of us – our reputations, our families, our *futures*.

Sanjay cleared his throat. 'He's so sharp, so careful about what he uploads. Always just enough to keep everyone guessing about who he is, but never enough breadcrumbs to lead us anywhere near his real identity.'

'Perhaps it's time,' I said coldly, 'that we sharpen up too.'

Everyone exchanged glances again. But this time, I felt included.

Chloe was The Singer.

Sanjay was The Artist.

Felicity was The Dancer.

Abeo was The King of Fashion.

And Karim Malik? Well, I didn't really have a talent like any of those.

My skill was recognizing what they all brought to the table, and utilizing it to produce addictive group content and merchandise. But that was the very skill that brought in the most views and revenue, that bound our friendship into a brand, forging a lifelong bond of secrecy, publicity and heartbreak.

'Let's end him,' I said, venom coating every word. 'Whoever the hell Mr Expose is, *he* needs to be exposed. And we're going to make it happen.'