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Opening extract from

The Ashley's: Jealous?

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1

A MODEL HOMECOMING

"HONEY, I'VE MISSED YOU SO MUCH!"

"I missed you, too, Mom." Ashley Alioto—otherwise known as A.A., one of the tween triumvirate of Ashleys who were the acknowledged social elite of Miss Gamble's School for Girls—smiled up at her mother.

Jeanine Alioto was as beautiful as ever, tall and willowy, her long dark hair perfectly razor-cut and blow-dried, her eyebrows immaculately threaded, her lips injected with just enough Venezuelan bee serum to make her mouth a seductive pout. Sometimes girls at school—non-Ashleys, of course—asked her if it was a drag having a former supermodel for a mother, as though getting great genes (not to mention an endless supply of great jeans) was a bad thing.

The only kind-of-bad part was when her mother disappeared for weeks at a time because some rich guy wanted her

to sail around the Caribbean with him or hang out at the Cannes Film Festival. A.A. was left at home in their penthouse apartment in the Fairmont Hotel with her stepbrother, Ned. They got along just fine without Jeanine—duh, room service!—but it was always better when her mother was home, not least because she always brought back a ton of cool gifts.

"And these are for you, Lili," said her mother, pulling a chic pair of black shoes from one of her overflowing Goyard suitcases and tossing them into the eager hands of Ashley Li.

The shoes meant for Lili had three-inch curvy heels with ankle straps fastened by a tiny ribbon. Receiving designer swag was just another one of the many perks of being an Ashley, but Lili, perched on the edge of the butter-colored chaise lounge, peered at them with a puzzled smile on her face.

"Thanks so much, Jeanine," she said in her peppiest voice, but A.A. knew what she was thinking. Lili was a total brand queen, and if she didn't recognize the name imprinted in the soft calfskin soles of the shoes, then they might as well be a pair of sweaty Crocs. "Are these an Argentinian . . . er, specialty?"

"Sweetie, they're tango shoes!" Jeanine scrambled to her feet. In her calf-high Fiorentini & Baker boots tucked into skintight Ksubi jeans, she was more than six feet tall, towering over the petite Lili and even over A.A., who'd inherited her mother's long, lean physique and was currently sprawled

out on the white sheepskin rug. "I got them for A.A. and then remembered she'd rather throw herself around on a soccer field than do anything ladylike, and I know you're the same size. I spent a few days in Buenos Aires at the tango festival, and these are from *the* tango shoe store. Everything's handmade and super expensive."

"I'd love to learn the tango," said Lili with a sigh, flicking her glossy jet-black hair, a dreamy expression floating over her pretty, heart-shaped face. A.A. let out a snort of laughter—all Lili needed was yet another extracurricular activity! When she wasn't taking violin or tennis lessons, she was brushing up on her French and Mandarin language skills, or learning how to take expert photographs, or helping a Stanford professor with his genetics research. If A.A. had Lili's overscheduled life, she'd go crazy.

"I thought you were going to Brazil." A.A. picked at the intricately woven blue hammock her mother had pulled from suitcase number one twenty minutes ago. There was an outdoor terrace off the suite where it would hang perfectly.

"Rio in the off-season just isn't me." Jeanine sighed, mussing her luxuriant dark locks. "The Copa is no fun in the rain, and I was sick of looking at all those undernourished girls from Ipanema hanging around and hoping to get discovered by Victoria's Secret."

A.A. rolled onto her stomach and rested her head in her

hands. She loved it when her mother started dishing on the modeling world. Jeanine always called herself the Last of the Supermodels, talking about the good old days when the top models were known by their first names alone, everyone had major attitude and the breasts to go with it, and affairs with celebrities were de rigueur—her first husband, Ned's father, was a British rock star. These days, she said, the girls were barely old enough to date, and all the magazine covers were hogged by skanky Hollywood startlets.

"And anyway," Jeanine continued, back on her knees and rifling through her suitcase again, "Gil was thinking of buying some gaucho ranch in Argentina, so we flew down there."

Gil was Richard Gilbert, the software tycoon Jeanine had been dating on and off for the last six months. She and Ned had already decided they didn't want him as a stepfather, but it was too soon to worry—Jeanine's relationships had a habit of self-combusting before too many commitments were made.

"Did you and *Mr. Gilbert* learn to dance the tango while you were there?" Lili had already slipped off her Tory Burch flats and was carefully tying the delicate ribbons of the tango shoes around her slim ankles.

"I don't know what Mr. Gilbert was doing," said Jeanine, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "After three days galloping around in the mud wearing a poncho, I'd had enough. And

let's just say horses weren't the only thing he was checking out in Argentina."

She tugged a vibrant purple-patterned silk scarf out of her bag and draped it over A.A.'s shoulders, and then rummaged for another one, this time a swirling, kaleidoscopic mix of greens and pinks.

"For you," Jeanine said, wafting it at Lili. "These are just Pucci—I picked them up at the airport when my flight back was delayed. I grabbed a blue one for Ashley, too, because I know how you three *have* to have the same things."

"So you and Gil have broken up?" A.A. tried not to sound too pleased. She sat up to adjust her trademark pigtails and loop the scarf around her neck.

"Let's just say I need someone who's man enough to tango with me and me alone," Jeanine said, rocking back on her heels and shooting them her famous wicked *Cosmo*-cover smile. "And you know what I always tell you, girls."

"Leave them while you're still looking good!" chorused A.A. and Lili, laughing. For the millionth time in her twelve years, A.A. felt relieved and happy that her mother was so much fun, more of a friend than a mom. It was so easy to talk to her. Everything was better when Jeanine was home—even if she did insist on redecorating their luxurious penthouse suite way too often. But as long as she didn't let her snooty decorator banish A.A. and Ned's vast video game collection

or try to downsize the flat-screen TV in the loft-sized living room, they wouldn't complain.

"So what's been going on at Hogwarts?" her mother asked, pulling the Pucci scarf away from A.A. and tying it in an effortlessly chic headband around her own hair.

"Social Club had its first coed mixer with the Gregory Hall boys," Lili told her, "which I pretty much organized—"

"Pretty much nearly murdering Ashley at the same time," interrupted A.A., and then they both scrambled to fill Jeanine in on the crazy events of just a week ago. The vanilla cupcakes Lili ordered had triggered Ashley Spencer's serious nut allergy, and she'd ended up unconscious on the dance floor.

No one had known about Ashley's allergy, except A.A., who'd only remembered Ashley's secret when Ashley wannabe and terminal dork Lauren Page had asked if Ashley happened to be allergic to anything. If it hadn't been for quick thinking on Lauren's part, Lili would be facing a future in juvenile hall rather than Groton.

"Sounds like you all owe this girl Lauren," said Jeanine. Outside, a light rain pattered against the tiles of the terrace, and she reached for the remote control, instantly conjuring up a flickering fire in the white granite fireplace.

A.A. and Lili exchanged glances: That climber Lauren was still in social Siberia—that is, unless the Ashleys decided

otherwise. Lili and A.A. were neutral on the subject, and Ashley had had other things on her mind since the dance.

Namely *one* other thing. Namely Tri Fitzpatrick. The boy that A.A. had known forever, her video-game buddy. The boy who was the cutest (and shortest) seventh grader at Gregory Hall. The boy who was supposed to be crushing on *her*, not on Ashley. Not that she was interested in him, so why did it bother her so much that he'd finally found someone who returned his affections?

"Anyway, Lauren's old news. Everyone's talking about something else now," A.A. told her mother. "At the beginning of this week, the weirdest thing happened."

"There's this new blog," Lili chimed in, her voice as animated as her face. "Nobody knows who's behind it!"

"But it's someone at our school, that much is obvious." A.A. pulled off her cashmere socks and wriggled her bare toes.

"It's like Facebook," Lili added breathlessly. "You have to check it every day, or every hour, or every five minutes!"

"Everyone's saying we're the ones who did it, but it's not true," A.A. said, looking at Lili, who shook her head vehemently.

"What are you girls talking about?" Jeanine asked, emptying her giant makeup bag onto the polished wood floor and grabbing a Chanel nail polish bottle before it rolled away.

"It's called AshleyRank," A.A. explained. "That's why everyone thinks the Ashleys started it."

"All the seventh-grade girls are ranked according to how cute and popular they are. Totally addictive. You know," Lili smirked, "like watching *Shark Week*. A feeding frenzy. Who gets to rule the ocean—or in this case, seventh grade." She reached into her beige Fendi Spy bag and retrieved her Blackberry, frowning a little as she tapped on the miniature screen. "Here it is. AshleyRank, one through thirty-six."

"Cass Franklin is number thirty-six," Lili said, her voice full of pity and condescension. She didn't have to check the blog again because she'd already memorized the key details.

"That's the girl I told you about," A.A. said to her mom. "The one who should be living in a plastic bubble. She has to keep an oxygen tank in her bag in case of emergency."

Jeannine looked concerned. "How awful!"

"Yeah. It's social death," Lili added.

A.A. laughed, then felt a little bad about laughing.

"More to the point," continued Lili, who looked a bit impatient, "the Ashleys hold the top three spots. That's why everyone thinks we came up with this."

"And you're sure you didn't?" Jeanine sounded amused.

"I know *I* didn't," said A.A.

"I certainly didn't." Lili was indignant, and A.A. knew why: Lili was the number three Ashley, behind A.A. and, at

number one, the universally acknowledged Queen Bee of Miss Gamble's herself, Ashley Spencer.

The intercom chimed, and the front desk clerk announced another guest. A.A. told him to let her in: It was Ashley, arriving for her share of the South American fashion loot. The girl must have ESP. Jeanine was about to open the next suitcase and start pulling out fabulous clothes for her daughter to try on. Anything A.A. didn't want, Lili and Ashley could grab, and it was always funny watching them fight over A.A.'s leftovers.

The private elevator that opened directly into the apartment dinged.

"Hey, Ash, right on time as usual," A.A. called, looking up with a grin that soon disappeared from her pretty face.

Because when the elevator doors opened, and Ashley—cool, blond, and stylishly dressed, as usual—strolled in, she wasn't alone. Holding her hand in the most lame and embarrassing way, and gazing up at her with adoring puppy-dog eyes, as though they were actually, yuckily, *in love*, was Tri Fitzpatrick.

2

ALL'S FAIR IN LOVE AND FASHION

IT WAS SO TYPICAL OF ASHLEY TO BE LATE, thought Lili as A.A.'s very cool mom removed a conch-shell bikini from her luggage and tossed it to her daughter.

Lili laughed when A.A. blushed as she held the minuscule triangle top against her bountiful chest, but her mind was on her AshleyRank ranking.

She was so not happy about *that* at all. Lili hated to think she was lesser than anybody. She worked hard to get all As and keep her place in as many advanced classes as possible; plus, she was the head of the Honor Board at Miss Gamble's. Okay, so maybe in the small pond of the seventh-grade social circle she had to kowtow to Ashley Spencer. But with the

emergence of this mysterious blog that had appeared out of nowhere, she was suddenly relegated to the bronze-medal position. She'd always thought she'd outranked A.A. *at least.*

It didn't matter that there were thirty-three names below hers, or that the talk at school was about how the Ashleys had nabbed all the top spots. Lili knew she could never be happy until her name was the one on the very tippy-top of the social pyramid.

Why did Ashley have to be number one on AshleyRank? If anyone else had fallen over at the dance, they would have been humiliated. And Lauren No-Friends Page had to get all *Grey's Anatomy* and stab Ashley with an EpiPen, bringing her back to life. (Not that Lili was sad that Ashley was alive, of course—which wasn't the same thing as being happy that Ashley might be dead.) But Ashley had managed to turn it into a social triumph, nabbing the hottest seventh grader at Gregory Hall. Why did she have to be the first of the Ashleys to have a real boyfriend? It just wasn't fair!

Lili sighed. She looked across the room, where Ashley and Tri were sitting on the other long sofa, leaning against each other. They looked pretty cute together, she had to admit. She'd always assumed Tri had a thing for A.A. since the two of them hung out so much, but maybe she was wrong after all. He looked better paired up with Ashley, anyway. Somehow, next to Ashley, he didn't seem quite so short. His

hair was dark and hers was golden blond, and they were both gorgeous.

Tri was still wearing his Gregory Hall uniform—a white shirt and gray flannel pants, his blue and gold tie loosely knotted—but Ashley had gone home after school to change, of course. She was wearing her new Stitch jeans, a lace-trimmed cami, and a cute deep-V plaid hoodie from Limited Too. Earlier that day at school she'd told Lili that boys didn't like it if their girlfriends were dressed up all the time, like she was a total expert on boys all of a sudden!

"Tri, you're going to be very bored," A.A.'s mom was warning him. "We have a lot of clothes to get through here!"

"He doesn't mind," said Ashley in her bossiest voice, and Lili glanced over at Tri, wondering how he'd react to Ashley—sorry, his *girlfriend*—speaking for him. But he didn't seem to mind.

"I'll just suffer in silence, Mrs. A," he said, not taking his eyes off Ashley. A.A. was glaring at him from across the expansive coffee table. Lili noticed that whenever Ashley and Tri were together, A.A. always found some way to excuse herself. But there was no escape this time.

Lili wished Ashley hadn't brought Tri either. She didn't want a guy there while they were trying on clothes. How exactly were they going to do this with a boy in the room?

"I know what we'll do," said A.A.'s mom, reading Lili's

mind. "A.A., why don't you drag over that shoji screen, and you girls can get changed behind it so Tri doesn't have to keep closing his eyes."

"That's a great idea," said Lili, knowing that she couldn't have gotten dressed and undressed in front of a boy. She didn't even have any brothers—she was the middle child in a family of five daughters, with a father who spent most of his time in his huge, book-lined study when he wasn't spending long hours at work.

"I'll help you," offered Tri, but A.A. shrugged her shoulders and gave a dismissive snort.

"Thanks but no thanks." A.A. was practically scowling. "I don't need *your* help." Lili saw A.A.'s face flush red, even though she wasn't sitting anywhere near the fireplace.

A.A. strode across the room to the Japanese folding screen. It was made from gold silk, and three elegant flying cranes were etched into the fine fabric. Two years ago Jeanine had filmed a cell phone commercial in the country and had it shipped back as part of her shopping bounty; she'd said the screen was an antique, from a geisha house in Kyoto.

The screen was taller than A.A., and she was struggling to close and lift it, but she was clearly determined to manage without Tri's help.

"C'mon, let me get it," Tri said, getting up from the couch and picking up the other end of the screen.

"Oh, all right!" A.A. huffed, looking put out.

"What's with you?" Tri asked, an annoyed edge to his voice.

"Nothing!" said A.A., puffing her cheeks as they pushed the screen across the room.

"Are you sure?" he insisted, looking straight at A.A. as if seeing her for the first time that afternoon. That dreamy glaze—the one that had been on his face since the night of the dance, almost as if he'd been hypnotized by Ashley—was gone for a moment.

"Positive. I just—I wish you hadn't—," A.A began to say.

"What?"

"Nothing!"

Tri looked frustrated as he picked up his edge of the screen.

Lili thought maybe A.A. had changed her mind about Tri. A.A. had always sworn she didn't like him "that way," but maybe she was finally seeing him in a different light. Could she even be jealous of Ashley? A.A. had certainly been cheerful all day until the elevator doors opened and Ashley had flounced in with Tri on her arm.

"Is over here good?" Tri asked after dragging the screen across the rug and setting it down by the glass doors to the terrace. His forehead looked a little sweaty, since he'd done most of the lifting.

A.A. grunted as if she couldn't care less, not even trying to hide her irritation as she plopped down on a low, squishy stool near Lil rather than returning to the sofa.

"I don't care about stripping down myself," Jeanine told them, holding up a silk blouse and scrutinizing it. "Backstage at a fashion show, you're naked eighty percent of the time. You can't even wear undies in case they show through a dress."

"Mom!" said A.A., looking sharply at Tri.

"TMI," Tri joked, giving Ashley a squeeze.

"Maybe Tri should leave—this is a girl thing," A.A. mumbled, but only Lili heard her—Ashley was squealing and trying to pry Tri's hands away, while Jeanine was laughing because she'd embarrassed him.

And then it was time to try on clothes. A.A. took up her post behind the screen, and Jeanine hurled outfit after outfit over to her. Whatever A.A. didn't want, she threw back into the room.

Ashley soon forgot about cuddling up with Tri, Lili noticed; she abandoned him and moved into receiver position near the screen, trying to edge Lili out. As soon as they'd grabbed a couple of items, they headed behind the screen to join A.A., pulling on tops and skirts, wriggling into perfect little dresses, knocking elbows and hips as they struggled to change clothes.

"Maybe I should be the one behind the screen," Tri called. Nobody responded; this was no time for jokes.

Every time Ashley pulled on a different outfit, she'd sashay out to pose for Tri. "What do you think?" she asked, coming out in a red flamenco dress.

"You look great," he told her. He said that about everything she put on, almost automatically.

Hidden behind the screen, A.A. stuck her finger in her mouth and mimed gagging.

Lili sniggered, but A.A. didn't laugh. She was really in a funk now, barely bothering to try on most of the clothes. Lili wished she would lighten up already. This was supposed to be fun.

"I'm tired," A.A. said, taking off the ruffled silk camisole she was wearing and throwing it to the ground. She put on her stretchy T-shirt again and walked out from behind the screen. "I'm done, Mom. whatever else you have in the bag can go to Ashley or Lili."

Lili followed, stopping to retrieve the cami. She sat on the edge of the chaise, deciding to try on her tango shoes again to see how they'd look with the the Phillip Lim minidress she'd managed to tug out of Ashley's greedy hands. Ashley was spinning around by the sofa, modeling the twirly Temperley skirt A.A. had rejected as too girly.

"All right, last items, ladies," said Jeanine, rocking back

on her heels. "It's Chloé, but I guess I don't need to tell you two that."

Lili stopped fiddling with the ribbons on her shoes. In Jeanine's hands was the most perfect weathered, shrunken leather jacket in a creamy caramel color. Three-quarter sleeves, old-school wool collar, with hidden zippers and a fitted waist. From underneath it peeped a poufy bubble dress with mirrored detailing. It was amazing. Lili *had* to have it.

"I'll try it—," she began, scrambling to her feet, but Ashley had leaped through the air somehow and was bearing down on the jacket. As Lili grabbed the left shoulder, Ashley took possession of the right sleeve.

"Why don't you both try it on?" Jeanine suggested, and to Lili's surprise, Ashley stepped back.

"You first, Lil," she said, smiling like a crocodile. Lili slipped behind the Japanese screen and took off her Luella button-down and Da-Nang capris. She slipped on the dress, which floated on her body, and zipped up the jacket. It fit her beautifully, though the sleeves were maybe a little long—Jeanine had bought it with long-limbed A.A. in mind. The skirt hit right at the knees, the fabric draping against her legs. She stepped into the room and did a slow twirl for her audience.

"Is it almost over?" groaned Tri, slumping lower in his seat.

"No one's making you stay," A.A. snapped at him.

Ashley, still beaming, walked over and stroked one of the jacket's soft sleeves.

"Yummy!" she gushed, and then clicked her fingers. "My turn."

Five minutes later Ashley emerged from the makeshift dressing room, her eyes sparkling in triumph.

"I hate to say this," she said with a toss of her long blond hair, "because I know it sounds so conceited. But you have to admit, Lil—this looks way better on me."

Lili opened her mouth to protest, but no words came out. Because Ashley was right. It did look better on her. The proportions of the jacket suited her more, and the skirt was an inch shorter, the perfect length.

"It'll look perfect with my new crocodile boots," she told Jeanine. "Don't you think it suits me best?"

A.A.'s mother shook her head and laughed.

"You girls have to sort it out," she said. "This is more tiring than a twelve-hour flight. A.A., darling, will you call down for some herbal tea?"

"So what do you say, Lil?" Ashley asked.

"I guess," said Lili uncertainly, flopping down on the lounge chair, defeated. And that was it—decided just like that. What Ashley wanted, Ashley got. Clothes, bags, jewelry, boyfriends. Lili just didn't know how much longer she could stand it.