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opening extract from

Young, Loaded & Fabulous

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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 flute; 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

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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.

Chapter 2

‘T! Welcome back!’ exclaimed Jasper von Holstadt, plucking the unlit cigarette from his mouth and thumping Tristan’s shoulder. Jasper’s fag was his trademark gimmick, always dangling from his lips in that ‘give-a-shit’ way that girls went wild over.

‘Jas! How’ve you been?’ Tristan grinned, his hazel eyes sparkling. ‘I heard your dad caved and finally bought you that Porsche.’

‘Damn right he did. I lost it for a few days though. Forgot where I parked it and had to pretend to the old man that I was having it cleaned.’

T laughed. He settled into an empty armchair, pulled out his vintage gold Zippo and lit up one of Seb’s cigarettes.

‘Yeah, go ahead. It’s a free-for-all,’ Seb said sarcastically, snatching the pack and lighting one for himself, too.

‘Come on, don’t be so tight, you’ve probably got ten more of those hidden in your jacket.’ Tristan put on an official voice. ‘Concealed about your person.’ No one

was allowed to smoke in *Emerald's*, of course, but the boys never paid attention to rules and the bouncers turned a blind eye. Just like they did with everything else that went on in the club's nooks and crannies.

'Anyway,' Tristan said, shifting to the edge of his seat and giving Seb a quizzical look, 'what are these rumours I've been hearing about you and Mimah Calthorpe de Vyle-Hanswicke? Did she really pay you a thousand pounds to sleep with her? That's a bit rank, isn't it?'

Seb took a drag of his cigarette and stared at the disco ball revolving above them. This was irritating; all people seemed to do these days was to ask him about Jemimah Calthorpe de Vyle-Hanswicke. He had no idea where the rumours had come from. All he knew was that he'd been the focus of gossip for days and it was making him very uncomfortable. Seb had always been perfectly content to be overshadowed by Tristan. He wasn't a centre-of-the-group, life-and-soul-of-the-party type of guy. He was just . . . well, he wasn't even sure *who* he was any more.

It was time to deflect the talk.

'Dunno,' he ventured. 'Last I heard, Mimah had become a raving lesbian.'

'Are you fucking serious?' Tristan slapped the arm of his chair.

'Er, yeah. Totally. I saw her coming onto Arabella Scott at some party last week. It was hilarious.'

'Arabella?' Tristan smirked, inhaling smoke. 'Well, at

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least Minah's got good taste. Bella's fit.' He grinned slyly. 'Fitter than you are, anyway.'

'Dickhead!' Seb punched him in the arm. The two friends chuckled and Tristan, feeling a rush of wellbeing, contentedly surveyed the group around the table. His eyes fell on Alice, across from him. She looked good tonight. She was wearing something white and floaty, and it suited her. He wondered when they'd have a chance to talk. There was something he needed to say.

Just then, Seb and Jasper cracked up, and he turned back to find out what he'd missed.

'Mmmm, yeah, how interesting.' Alice nodded to George Demetrios on her side of the table, pretending to listen as he droned on about his grandmother's houses and olive orchards in Greece. Someone get me some drugs or I'm going to die of boredom, she thought. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Tristan and the others. What was making them laugh so hard? T was probably telling raunchy stories about his summer of fucking 'love'. All boys were the same. That was why Alice was planning to be very careful when she finally let one . . . do it to her.

She sighed. T looked so hot with his hair long and quiffy like this, and she knew very well how muscular he was under his blazer and baggy jeans. All she could think about was him grabbing her in his arms and pressing her up against a wall. That one over there, under the Exit sign, would do just fine.

God, she hated him. And it was hot in here.

Tristan glanced up as Alice slipped past Tally out of her seat and hurried away, her slim hips swaying. She couldn't possibly be leaving, could she? No, her white pashmina was still on the couch. He got up abruptly and trailed her through the club.

Reaching the back entrance, Alice pushed aside the curtains and glided up the external stairway to the street. It was cool and quiet out here. Rows of Georgian and Victorian houses, their stuccoed façades painted white, shone in the streetlights like ghosts, and she leaned back against one, feeling its chilly bricks through her peasant-style blouse. By now the queue had dispersed, music was pulsing up faintly from below, and in the east a stain of sunlight was just breaking through the dark.

Alice breathed in deeply. She loved these thick, late-summer nights when the dawns started early and went on forever. If the weather stayed this good, they'd be able to sneak out through the fields well into October to meet the boys in secret, halfway between St Cecilia's and its brother school, Hasted House.

Something rattled on the iron stairway. Alice jumped. Tristan.

'Hello, stranger,' he said. He sauntered up next to her, smelling of soap and cigarettes.

'Hi.'

'How was France? Did Dom and Hugo piss you off as much as usual?'

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‘Umm. They were fine.’ Alice paused, studying the new gold sandals that she’d bought last week at a market stall in St Tropez. She left one of those long, awkward silences that she knew T hated.

Tristan cleared his throat. ‘So, what else? What’s been happening while I’ve been away?’

‘Actually,’ Alice said crisply, ‘I wasn’t expecting to see you here. I thought you’d still be in East Hampton with . . . what’s-her-name. Nice of you to come back.’

Tristan studied her warily. ‘Oh, Dylan? Yeah, she was . . . well, I mean, that was just a summer thing. Fun for a while, but . . . whatever.’ He trailed off. Great start. Talk about clearing the air.

‘Hey, here’s an idea,’ he tried again, jumping playfully off the curb. ‘Let’s sneak over to Italy again at half-term, just the two of us. Or even somewhere else. I think we’ve got ten days off. It’s funny, I can’t stop thinking about how much fun we had this summer.’

Alice pursed her lips, trying not to grin. This couldn’t be more perfect! Not only had Tristan broken up with that American tart but here he was, basically admitting how much he’d missed her. She shrugged, as if she were utterly bored by his childish schemes.

‘Mmm, that would be nice, but half-term’s no good. It’s my cousin’s wedding in Rome, remember? And Italian *Vogue*’s throwing that huge engagement party for her. You’re on the guest list. I mean, I think you are.’

‘Of course!’ T said. ‘I forgot – Coco’s finally marrying

that Italian film star of hers. Well, we'll just have to go partying in Rome instead, then.'

'I suppose so.' Anyway,' Alice turned away down the staircase, making sure Tristan had a view of her bare, suntanned back, 'see you inside. I'm getting another drink.'

In the back room of the club, the DJ had started in on his repertoire of cheese. He was playing 'Hips Don't Lie' by Shakira, and Tally was gyrating provocatively, her short dress skimming her thighs. She was double-fisting Martinis, and each time she moved, the drinks sloshed about.

'*Ooooooh*,' lip-synced George Demetrios, raising his arms over his head like a zombie and grinding his groin into Tally's bum. Alice rolled her eyes. That song was so 2006.

'Hey, Ali.' Tally stumbled across the dance floor. 'There you are. I saw you go outside with Tris. So, what do you think? What are we going to do?' She shoved a cocktail into Alice's hands.

Alice stared at her. Not again. Why did Tally keep talking rubbish? She should really sober up.

'He told me he dumped that girl.' Alice raised her voice as clearly as she could above the music. 'Look, I know we didn't want him messing around with some American bitch. But it's over. Why are you making such a big deal?'

Abruptly, Tally stopped dancing. 'Hold on, he didn't tell you the other thing?'

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‘What other thing?’ Alice almost screamed. ‘Stop being so cryptic and spit it out!’

‘Fine,’ Tally looked offended. ‘I just thought I would have said, that’s all.’ Sinking down onto a plush sofa nearby, she patted the cushion next to her. Alice sat.

‘Tristan broke up with Dylan because she lived in New York and he had to come back here,’ Tally explained. Her face was cracking into a sly smile.

Alice shrugged. ‘Yeah?’

‘I said *lived*,’ Tally went on. ‘Note the tense.’

Sipping from her glass, Alice narrowed her eyes.

‘Just before Tristan left, he suddenly found out that Dylan was moving to London – stalking him – like, right away. And wait, here’s the funniest part.’ Tally giggled. ‘Dylan’s coming to St Cecilia’s! Can you believe it? Starting tomorrow, Tristan’s ex-girlfriend is going to be in our class.’

Alice coughed. She was choking on her Martini.