

young,
loaded
& FABULOUS

KISS & BREAK UP

Kate Kingsley

headline

Chapter 1

‘URGENT MEETING, 4 PM!’ Alice Rochester read off the sign outside the Lower Sixth common room. She beckoned furiously to Sonia Khan. ‘Hurry up! We can’t be late.’

It was the first day back at St Cecilia’s after Half Term, and the boarding school grounds were packed. Smartly-dressed parents waved at each other from the windows of Porsches and Rolls-Royces. Girls squealed and gossiped about their Caribbean holidays. Chauffeurs grimaced as they hauled trunks and suitcases up to dorm rooms. And over all the chaos, the sun hung low in the October sky.

Sweeping through the common room door, Alice dropped on to her favourite maroon couch and unfolded the official-looking letter that she’d nicked from Daddy’s desk that morning. Sonia trotted behind.

‘Ali,’ she pleaded, ‘just tell me what it says.’

‘Tell you what *what* says?’ Alice asked innocently, dangling the letter just out of Sonia’s reach. She loved having more information than her friends. Especially more than Sonia, who was ridiculously easy to wind up.

‘That letter!’ Sonia practically screeched. She lunged for it across the couch – but Alice dodged out of the way and Sonia crashed face down into the cushions. ‘My nose!’ she yelped, checking for damage. ‘Is it swollen? It feels swollen. If it’s broken again then it’s your fault, *Alice.*’

Ping!

Smirking at Sonia’s distress, Alice slid her iPhone from her pocket and skimmed her new text.

Miss u already Sexy. See u at the social 2moro nite. Can’t w8 for the costume. T x

‘OMG,’ gasped Sonia, who was reading the message over Alice’s shoulder. ‘Tristan is *so* adorable. He obviously has, like, sex on the brain.’

‘Excuse me, Nosey,’ Alice snapped, cupping her hand over the screen. ‘Ever hear of privacy?’

But she was pink with pleasure. It was true. Tristan Murray-Middleton, her oldest childhood friend, was proving that he could be more than an amazing mate; he could be a model boyfriend, too. At least, the second time round. T and Alice had first got together in September at the beginning of the Lower Sixth, but after a few dates, Tristan had freaked out and run a mile. Then last week, while he and Alice had been partying in Rome over Half Term, they’d decided to give their relationship another go.

Things hadn’t gone very far yet, not physically, but Alice was planning to change that in the very near

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future. Being a virgin at the age of almost seventeen was getting embarrassing (even though it was a fact only her three closest friends knew). Anyway, T was gorgeous and sensitive and popular, and he'd made it extremely clear that he wanted to *do* it. Alice was planning to oblige – as soon as they were alone.

UR gonna LOVE my costume, she typed, biting back a grin. Not telling u any more. U just gotta w8 & guess what I am . . . xox

With a shiver of anticipation, Alice hit *send* and slipped her phone back into the pocket of her grey wool school skirt. She'd planned tomorrow night's outfit down to the very last detail, and it was everything a Halloween costume should be: short, tight and busty. Well, maybe 'busty' was pushing it. Alice folded her arms over her chest. Somehow, before tomorrow night, she was going to have to grow boobs. Either that, or get over the fact that she was flat as a pancake. Because, at the Halloween party, T was going to see her naked for the first time.

'Move!' called a breezy voice. 'Coming through.'

A delicate jasmine scent wafted through the room, followed by the clatter of heels. A second later the whole sofa jittered as Natalya Abbott flopped down.

'Do I hear congratulations?' Tally beamed, her sea-grey eyes sparkling.

'What for?' Alice glanced enviously at her best friend's tousled white-blond hair and perfect figure.

'I'm on time for once!'

‘Not,’ Alice protested. ‘You’re the last one here.’ She gestured round the Tudor House common room, which, during the past few minutes, had filled to bursting point with the rest of the Lower Sixth. Girls were perched on radiators, tabletops, window ledges and armchairs, comparing suntans and Half Term escapades. In one corner, Gabrielle Bunter was actually bouncing up and down as she forced blonde, cherubic Flossy Norstrup-Fitzwilliam to listen to some boring story. Gabby’s flab was wobbling so much that she looked like a giant jelly bowl. Ugh. This was the problem with coming back to school after ten days’ break: how quickly you started to feel like you’d never been away.

Alice heaved a long-suffering sigh and turned back to the letter in her hand. ‘Hoare?’ she sneered.

‘Now, now,’ Tally snickered, ‘I told you not to call Sonia that anymore.’

‘Oi,’ Sonia grumbled.

Alice giggled. ‘Shut up, Sone. No, really, can you believe this – our new housemistress’s name is Mrs *Hoare!*’

‘Come on,’ Tally snorted with laughter. ‘Of course it’s not.’

‘It is! Look, it says so in this letter Daddy got.’

‘Oh. My. God.’ Tally grabbed the paper. ‘How the hell are we meant to call her that without cracking up? We’ll obviously have to ignore the woman for the rest of the year.’

Alice shook her head. ‘It’s just so weird that Miss

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Sharkreve's gone. Daddy says he's simply shocked that she left. He says he hopes our new housemistress is up to scratch, otherwise it might jeopardise our academic careers.'

Tally rolled her eyes. Of course Alice's father would spout something like that. Richard Rochester owned one of London's most eminent trading firms, was notoriously strict, and put a ton of pressure on Alice and her two brothers to do well. Everyone knew that the reason Alice worked so hard was because her father insisted she get an offer from Oxford next year. He was counting on her to carry on the family tradition – especially since Alice's older brother, Dominic, had been too busy getting stoned at school to even think about Oxford. The fact that Dom was currently one of the coolest undergrads at Edinburgh didn't appease Richard Rochester in the slightest.

'Girlies, oh no,' Sonia burst out. She was twisting a strand of her shiny, black hair round her manicured fingers. 'I've just thought of something bad. Miss Sharkreve was our housemistress for an entire half term and she never once caught us breaking rules. Like, we never got gated for smoking, or for drinking in our rooms, or for sneaking out to town. What if this Mrs Hoare woman is the opposite?'

'She'd better not be,' Alice frowned, 'or we're fucked for the Hasted House Halloween social tomorrow night. How are we gonna survive a school party if we can't sneak in extra booze? The whole point of being in the

Sixth Form is that you're supposed to be able to get away with shit.'

'Guys, chill,' Tally yawned, sinking back into the couch. 'We'll find a way to have fun, whatever she's like. Anyway, Mimah can just shove a couple of bottles down her top tomorrow. Smuggle the booze between her boobs.' Tally giggled. 'You can do that, right, Mimah? Give yourself a *booze* job?' Grinning, she stuck out her foot and nudged Jemimah Calthorpe de Vyle-Hanswicke, who was sitting scrunched up on the floor. Mimah had always been the bustiest member of their clique. 'Mimah? Hello? Earth to Mime . . .'

'*Stop* that. What the fuck do you want?'

Tally recoiled at Mimah's harsh tone. Biting her lip, she scrutinised her friend. Mimah's face was pinched and pale. This couldn't be good. Mimah had had a million family problems over the past few months – surely no more had surfaced over Half Term?

'Shhh!' a whisper rustled through the room. Footsteps echoed in the marble foyer and the Lower Sixth rose to their feet. Two women swept through the door. One of them was St Cecilia's headmistress, Mrs Traphorn. Sonia craned her neck, but only Alice was tall enough to see the other woman over the crowd.

'What does she look like, Al? Ali!'

'Stop poking me!'

Mrs Traphorn strode to the front of the room and positioned herself near the large flat-screen TV. Her

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companion hung back in a shadowy corner, obscured by a large floor lamp.

‘Good afternoon, girrrls,’ Mrs Traphorn droned poshly, rolling her r’s. ‘You may sit down.’

As usual, the Trap had pinned her grey hair into a bun. She was sporting a sleeveless cardigan, a plaid skirt and clumpy shoes. Tally shook her head. Teacher fashion overload.

‘Welcome back to school,’ the Trap went on. ‘I hope you’ve all had a verrry prrrroductive Half Term. I have an important person to intrrrroduce to you today.’ She paused and patted her bun.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ Tally hissed in Alice’s ear, ‘can’t the old bat get on with it?’

‘As you all know,’ the Trap droned on, ‘Miss Sharkreve left St Cecilia’s at the end of last half term, to teach at a school in Scotland. We were extrrrremely sorry to lose her.’

Sonia snorted.

‘But with me here today is Miss Sharkreve’s replacement as Lower Sixth housemistress, Mrs Edwina Hoare.’ The Trap clasped her hands. ‘Mrs Hoare joins St Cecilia’s from Pembroke Ladies’ School, where she was a beloved housemistress for seventeen years.’

‘*Seventeen years?*’ Tally sputtered. ‘If I had to stay at school that long, I’d kill myself.’

‘Shhh,’ Alice hissed. She was squinting at the housemistress’s obscured figure, but still couldn’t make out her face. This was excruciating. If they ended up

with a bitch or a weirdo, their whole Lower Sixth year could go wrong. Fast.

‘I’m sure I don’t have to remind you,’ the Trap continued, ‘that at the end of last half term, St Cecilia’s saw the sudden departure of its A-level English teacher, Mr Logan.’

Alice felt a set of nails dig into her arm. At the words ‘Mr Logan’, Tally had tensed up and turned very, very pale.

‘The good news is, in addition to her housemistress duties, Mrs Hoare will be taking over Mr Logan’s vacant post.’

Alice gave her friend a sympathetic look. Tally had been trying for the past couple of weeks to get over her infatuation with the hot young English teacher who’d broken her heart. Since the second he’d arrived at St Cecilia’s in September, Mr Logan had flirted outrageously with Tally, tricking her (and everyone else) into thinking they were in love. The two of them had even shared a secret, passionate kiss on a school trip to Dublin. Then it had turned out that Mr Logan was secretly dating Miss Sharkreve, and the two teachers had quit their jobs and left the school. Tally felt sick at the memory.

‘That’s all I’m going to say, girls,’ Mrs Traphorn intoned from the front of the room, snapping her back to reality. ‘I’m sure you’re very keen to get to know Mrs Hoare on your own, so I’ll leave you to it.’

‘Finally,’ Alice breathed. She leaned forward as the new Lower Sixth housemistress emerged into the light. The next instant, her face contorted in alarm.

Chapter 2

‘Help,’ Sonia whispered, clutching Alice’s wrist.

‘Hello, girls,’ Mrs Hoare said. She had a reedy voice. She was short and bony, with frizzy hair hacked into a triangle-shaped wedge. Her eyes were small and vulture-like. Her thin lips were coated in lipstick, which had caked and rubbed on to her teeth.

‘Where did St C’s find this woman?’ Tally mouthed. ‘It looks like they held an ugly contest and she won first prize.’

Mrs Hoare smiled sourly and raised her left hand, dangling several small sheets of paper in the air. ‘These are sticky tags,’ she announced. ‘*Why sticky tags?* you may ask.’

‘Oooh yeah,’ Tally muttered, ‘please tell us. Oh, please. I’m dying to know.’

‘Here’s why,’ Mrs Hoare snapped: ‘I want you all to take one, print your name on it, and stick it to your chest. You will wear these until I’ve memorised each and every one of your names. I’ve found that name tags are the best way to keep track of my pupils.’

'Name tags?' Flossy Norstrup-Fitzwilliam sputtered under her breath. 'What are we? Dogs?'

'Chop chop,' Mrs Hoare called, jiggling the sheets. 'What's everyone waiting for? They won't bite, girls. They only *stick*.' She cackled, clearly under the impression that this was a clever joke, and watched as the girls shuffled to the front of the room.

'Oi.' Sonia poked Alice from behind.

'Ouch. What?'

'Look at Dylan.' Sonia nodded towards a busty blonde girl who was sticking a nametag to her yellow school blouse. 'See how chirpy she's acting? What's her problem?'

'Who cares?' Alice peeled off a label. 'She always looks chirpy. She's *American*.'

'I know, but today she's, like, freaking me out. She was actually humming to herself in our dorm earlier on. It was a complete—'

'You!' Mrs Hoare snapped.

'—nightmare. I wanted to punch her in the—'

'*You!* With the diamond watch!'

Sonia jumped. She'd never suspected that anyone, let alone an upstart new housemistress, might be addressing her so rudely. 'M-me?'

'Yes. Did I say people could chitchat amongst themselves?'

Sonia gave her a blank look.

'Take a wild guess,' Mrs Hoare shot sarcastically.

'Uh, no you didn't?'

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‘Bravo! Class, we’ve got a genius on our hands. Now, do us all a favour, blabbermouth, and Shut. Your. Gobl!’

Several people tittered. Sonia’s eyes nearly popped out of her head.

‘Can you believe this?’ she hissed in Alice’s ear as soon as Mrs Hoare’s back was turned. ‘As *if* our parents are paying this much money for us to be verbally abused by our housemistress. I’m totally phoning Daddy after this and then that bitch will see who—’

‘Shut up. Do you want to get *me* in trouble for whispering, too?’ Alice rolled her eyes and marched back towards the couch, shooting a glance at Dylan Taylor on her way. Sonia was right – the girl was glowing. And it was weird: what could possibly have happened over Half Term to make her look so bloody happy? Ever since Dylan had arrived at St Cecilia’s from New York in September, her life had been hellish – and that was mostly Alice’s doing. Because not only had Dylan dated Tristan over the summer (which was reason enough for Alice to hate her), but she was also cute, curvy, sparky and blonde. And the last thing Alice needed was someone like that hanging around, trying to hog all the boys’ attention.

‘Class!’ Mrs Hoare ordered, clapping her hands. ‘Settle down. You should all have made your name tags by now; it’s not rocket science. I have several important rules to go over.’

Tally snorted. ‘Why does that not surprise me?’

‘First, the most important: no sneaking out of school.’

‘Oh *really?*’ Sonia muttered sarcastically. ‘Usually every teacher lets us sneak out whenever we want.’

‘I hear the St Cecilia’s girls have a habit of disobedience,’ Mrs Hoare went on, glaring round the room. ‘Listen closely: that’s about to change. None of you will leave the grounds during the week unless I give specific permission. If I find any of you have sneaked off into the woods for a cigarette, or made an unauthorised appearance in town, I will not be lenient. Finally: I understand that, because you’re in the Sixth Form, you’re allowed to leave school on Saturdays and Sundays. But you may *only* do so if you sign out on my list first. I need to know where you are at all times or, I warn you, there’ll be consequences.’

Alice put up her hand.

‘Yes?’

‘I just thought I should remind you, Mrs Hoare – this Thursday is Guy Fawkes Night.’

Mrs Hoare raised her eyebrows. ‘Excuse me?’

‘You know, Guy Fawkes?’ Alice prompted helpfully. She always liked to get on teachers’ good sides. ‘*Remember, remember the fifth of November. Gunpowder, treason and—*’

‘I know the rhyme, thank you very much. I’m a teacher, not a moron.’ Mrs Hoare’s eyes narrowed as she took in Alice’s tall, model-like frame, her flawless olive skin and her shiny brown hair. ‘And you think I should care about Guy Fawkes Night because . . . ?’

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‘Oh, sorry,’ Alice chortled apologetically, ‘let me explain. You see, there’s a big fair that evening on Hasted Common, in town. They have a bonfire, fireworks, games. The Sixth Form get to go every year. It’s a school privilege.’

‘Oh, a privilege, is it?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Well, I’ve got news for you, Alice, er –’ Mrs Hoare squinted at Alice’s chest – ‘Roachmaster.’

‘Rochester,’ Alice corrected, attempting an airy voice.

‘You will kindly not interrupt! Privileges must be earned. And from what I hear, the Lower Sixth hasn’t earned anything at all this term. It’s only October and you’ve already caused a scandal at a parents’ charity show and lost your housemistress to another school. Which reminds me: I want everyone on their best behaviour tomorrow night at the Hasted House Halloween social. The fact that Hasted is a boys’ school is not an excuse to make a show of yourselves. Remember, you’re young ladies, not to mention ambassadors of St Cecilia’s, and I expect you to behave that way.’

Alice narrowed her eyes to slits. Judging from this bitch’s attitude, it probably wouldn’t help to explain that they’d known the Hasted House boys for years, that they had zero intention of being on their best behaviour tomorrow night and that they couldn’t make a show of themselves any more than they already had at countless parties.

‘This meeting is dismissed,’ Mrs Hoare said. ‘I wouldn’t want to keep you from your work, I’m sure you all have plenty to prepare for tomorrow’s lessons. And girls!’ she barked above the sound of people scrambling to escape. ‘I’m expecting you to wear your name tags at all time. No exceptions!’

‘*No exceptions,*’ Mimah mimicked, reaching the stairs before the others and stomping all the way to the first floor. ‘*No boys. No Guy Fawkes. No interrupting. Kiss my arse.*’ She scuffed her Converse on the corridor’s regulation grey carpet. ‘I’ve never met such a bitch in my life. And the ho only just got here.’

‘The Ho!’ Tally cackled, pushing open the door to the room she shared with Alice. ‘Oh my god – genius! That’s got to be Mrs Hoare’s official name.’

‘Yeah,’ Sonia grumbled. ‘Suits her, rude cow.’ She flopped down on to Alice’s purple and white quilt. ‘It looks gorgeous in here, girlies. I wish I could live with you two instead of with Dylan. Ugh.’

Sonia surveyed the coveted corner room, which was famous throughout school for being one of the best in Tudor House. Golden late-afternoon sun poured through its three windows and flooded the alcove opposite the beds, which Alice and Tally had turned into their ‘entertaining nook.’ They’d furnished it with two school armchairs piled with cushions, a trunk doubling as a coffee-table, strings of fairy lights, and a fluffy white sheepskin rug, on to which Tally flung herself face-down.

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‘Would someone like to tell me what the hell the Ho is trying to pull about Guy Fawkes Night?’ she demanded, kicking off her grey suede ankle boots. ‘Does she actually think she can ban us from going?’

‘I don’t care what she thinks,’ Alice declared, glaring at Tally’s boots, which had landed miles apart from each other on the carpet. She knew very well who’d have to pick them up later – and it wouldn’t be Tally. ‘I promised Tristan I’d go, so I’m going. By the way,’ she sighed, her face going dreamy as she said Tristan’s name, ‘T was telling me the other night how brilliantly the band’s doing. They’ve got loads of gigs coming up. I wouldn’t be surprised if they got a record deal soon.’

‘Oh *please*,’ a voice sneered. Alice whipped round. Mimah was standing by an open window, practically spitting across the room. ‘Why do you always have to exaggerate? Of course T’s band isn’t about to get a record deal. They only bloody well got started a few weeks ago.’ She sucked in her cheeks, doing an impression of Alice’s angular face. ‘*Oooh, my boyfriend’s such a talented musician. He’s such an amazing guitarist. He’s gonna be world famous. Get real.*’

‘Oh. My. God,’ Alice grimaced, her eyes flashing. ‘*Someone’s* inner bitch escaped from its cage. Stupid me, thinking Jemimah Calthorpe de Vyle-Hanswicke was normal again. What is wrong with you?’

Mimah shoved her blunt black fringe out of her eyes and turned her back without a word. She glared out into

the evening, over the pretty garden that surrounded Tudor House and beyond its low brick wall to the Great Lawn, the vast carpet of grass that lay at the heart of the school. Girls wearing the yellow and grey St Cecilia's uniform flitted in and out of its shadows, between lamp-posts and buildings and fiery autumn trees.

'Mime,' Tally said quietly. She'd crept off the rug and now slipped her slim arm round her friend's athletic shoulders. She'd suspected something was wrong before and now she was certain. 'What's up? You've been acting funny all day.'

Mimah rubbed her temples. 'Nothing.'

'Come on. That's a lie.'

'I'm fine,' Mimah insisted, sinking down on to Alice's bed. 'I'm really sorry, Al. I didn't mean to lash out like that. Just PMS I guess.'

Alice nodded imperiously, but Tally looked at Mimah thoughtfully. She knew an excuse when she heard one.

Chapter 3

‘Well done, boys. Spiffing practice today!’ barked Brigadier Jones out on the Hasted House rugby pitch. The Brigadier, an ex-army officer who now devoted his life and soul to coaching sport at Hasted House, puffed out his chest and smacked a powerful fist into his palm. ‘Those puny bastards on the Glendale’s team won’t have a clue what’s hit ’em.’

‘Rah, rah, rah! Go Hasted Hawks!’ roared George Demetrios, high-fiving his two good mates, Tristan Murray-Middleton and Jasper von Holstadt, as they jogged off the pitch in their muddy white rugby shorts. ‘We’re gonna destroy them.’

‘Glendale’s are fierce, though,’ Jasper panted, his haughty, aristocratic face shining with sweat. ‘Brigadier, do you really think we can beat them next month?’

‘Damn right I do, if we keep up at this rate,’ the Brigadier blustered. ‘Besides, we’ve absolutely *got* to win this time. Those gimps have beaten us the past six years running. Lucky we’ve got this star for a captain.’ The coach locked his arm round Tristan Murray-Middleton’s neck. ‘Isn’t that right, T? We’re all counting on you, lad.’

‘Go Big T!’ George added, punching Tristan’s arm.

‘Ouch.’ Tristan rubbed his unruly hair, which was sticking out in all directions, and forced a smile, trying not to look doubtful. Sometimes it was great being team captain, but not at moments like this – not when everyone piled on the pressure and expected him to deal with it. The entire populations of St Cecilia’s and Hasted House would be there for the massive match against Glendale’s, and if Hasted lost – one guess who they’d blame.

‘T, follow me,’ Jasper said, squinting at the low, steely sky. ‘It’s about to bucket it down. Let’s make hot chocolate – *and smoke a few spliffs,*’ he whispered. ‘I’ve got some great shit in my room.’

‘Can’t, mate.’ T shook his head. ‘Love to, but we’ve got band practice. I said I’d play Seb and Rando my new song.’

‘Oh. Right. New song.’ Jasper whacked a clump of mud off his boot and watched T call to a pale, skinny boy who was lounging in the stands.

‘Oi, Seb! Ready?’

‘Ready.’ Seb Ogilvy brushed back his blond, haystack hair and leapt down on to the pitch, almost dropping the massive book in his hands.

‘Doing a little light reading, are we?’ T smirked.

‘Yeah, and it’s wicked,’ Seb gushed. ‘I bought it over Half Term – it’s a book on that street artist, Fade. Look how cool his stuff is. He’s having an exhibition at this gallery in London in a few weeks and I’m definitely going. Anyway, what’s your new song about?’

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'You'll see,' T replied. 'But listen, I've been thinking, we've got to grow our fan base. The Paper Bandits have only played one gig so far, which is pathetic considering all our contacts. Rando knows someone at the Young Leaders Society. Their huge gala is coming up in a few weeks and—'

'Yo, bitches!' a voice butted in. 'Wait.'

Tristan jumped. He'd thought Jasper had gone to get started on his spliffs-and-hot-chocolate plan – but apparently not.

'What's up?' T asked. 'We're talking business.'

'*Business.*' Jasper swatted at the word like a bug. 'Whatever. Who needs business when you can talk about fun? Ready for the big Halloween social tomorrow night?' He nudged Seb. 'I bet Sonia will be looking hot.'

'So?' Seb asked, turning red.

'So? It's about time you got your arse in gear and shagged her!' Jasper insisted, waving his hands in the air. 'Shag, snog, whatever. Come on, she's fancied you for ages. And she's well fit now, after her nose job.'

'You think? So why don't you bloody well shag her yourself?' Forcing a laugh, Seb thrust his hand into his jacket pocket and clenched the engraved silver whisky flask that he carried with him everywhere. A swig would be perfect right now, but Tristan had recently ranted at him for boozing too much and the last thing he wanted was to set T off again.

Raindrops hurled themselves at the paving-stones as

the trio entered an echoing courtyard and hurried round the edge of the grass. No one was allowed to walk on the green, of course – the gardeners slaved away all year to keep it lush. Seb squinted up at the courtyard’s four grey stone towers, built in the seventeen hundreds in the style of an Oxford or Cambridge college. He sighed. Tristan’s dad, Sir Cecil Murray-Middleton, was always going on about Oxford. He was adamant that T go to New College, just like him, and become a powerful politician in the House of Lords. T hated all the pressure, but at least his father gave a shit what he did. Seb’s dad, Sir Preston Ogilvy, had ‘better’ things to do. Like jetting round the world, buying expensive wines to add to his collection and coaxing high-society divorcées into the sack.

‘Here’s where we leave you, Jas,’ Tristan said, halting at the door of the music block. Unlike most of the school, this building was new, built of glass and steel. It was hidden tastefully behind a cluster of pines. ‘See you at supper. What are you up to now?’

‘Oh, I . . .’ Jasper’s expression flickered, then steadied into its usual arrogance. ‘I was coming with you lot.’

‘To practice?’ T raised his eyebrows. ‘Why?’

‘What do you mean, *why*? Rando’s my cousin and you two are my friends. Since when do I need a reason?’

‘Mate, chill.’ Tristan pulled up one of his blue-and-maroon striped rugby socks. ‘I just meant you’ll be bored. You know nothing about music.’

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‘What the –? That’s the biggest lie I’ve ever heard. You’ve seen me DJ. How do you think I got so good on my decks?’

Tristan smirked.

‘*What?*’

‘Oh, nothing.’ T chuckled, turning into a blue-carpeted hallway that was practically shaking with the sound of drums. He burst into a practice room. ‘Not bad, Rando!’

Tom Randall-Stubbs jumped. ‘Sorry?’ he yelled, suspending his drumsticks mid-air. ‘Can’t hear, it’s loud! Oh, hey Jas!’ he exclaimed. ‘What’re you doing here?’

‘All right, cuz,’ Jasper yawned. He plopped his tall, tanned body into a chair and stretched his legs luxuriantly. ‘T’s right, you do seem to be improving. Just thought I’d look in and see what’s happening with the band, maybe listen to the new song. The Paper Bandits need some fresh tunes – the ones you’ve got are fine, but they’re getting old.’ He drummed his fingers against a nearby guitar.

‘I’ll take that, thanks,’ Tristan snapped. He perched on an amp to tune up, while Jasper tapped his foot impatiently.

‘Right. Quiet please,’ T announced at last. ‘Here it is: “*In My Own Backyard*”. In a husky tenor, he began to sing:

*I travelled far to find you
But you were waiting, near me.*

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*I was blind, I don't know why
It took me years to see.*

*I never saw you as a lover –
You were my best friend.
I hunted love across the ocean,
But came home in the end.*

*Now at last, my love, I've found you.
The search was long and hard –
The hardship and the heartbreak
Left me lost and scarred.
Yes my love, I've found you,
Of course I found it hard –
The last place I thought of looking
Was in my own backyard . . .
The last place I thought of looking
Was in my own backyard.'*

The slow, wistful music died into silence. Seb and Rando leaned back, dreamy expressions on their faces. Then:

'I don't get it,' blared Jasper's voice. 'Is that meant to be about you and Alice, or something?'

Tristan turned pink. 'Of course not. It's art. You shouldn't take things so literally.'

'Yeah. OK. Sure. Apart from the fact that it clearly *is* about Alice. I mean, come on, "lover" who used to be

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your “best friend”? Subtle. And that bit about hunting love across the ocean – I mean, you met Dylan while you were in New York. Could you be any more blatant? I think you should rename the song “To Alice, My Dearest Love”.’

Tristan clenched his jaw. ‘Thanks for chiming in – *even though you’re not in the band,*’ he added under his breath. ‘I happen to like the title.’

‘Fine. Just trying to help, mate.’ Jasper yawned. ‘By the way, I was thinking, don’t you reckon you should take out the word “hard”?’

Tristan stared blankly.

‘As in, “I found it hard”?’ Jasper prompted. ‘Sounds a bit perverted, don’t you think? Like, *what* exactly did you find hard?’ He winked luridly. ‘Know what I mean?’

‘No. I have no idea what you mean, you complete weirdo.’ Tristan looked to Seb for help, but Seb was shaking with laughter. He ground his teeth. ‘Look, Jas, maybe you should piss off, OK? The Paper Bandits have a vibe going, we’re used to practising together and—’

‘So? All the more reason why you could do with a fresh opinion once in a while! Ever thought of getting a manager? I think I’d make a good one. I wouldn’t let you get stale.’

Tristan’s eyes narrowed.

‘Er, Jas,’ Rando jumped in hurriedly. ‘So, um, have you thought of a plan for tomorrow night?’

Jasper flicked his eyes to his cousin. ‘Plan? What for?’

Kate Kingsley

‘You know, for the Halloween social. Dylan Taylor’s gonna be there. I thought you’d been scheming how to get her to go out with you.’

At the mention of Dylan’s name, Jasper dropped his whole music-critiquing act and grinned. His first and only date with Dylan, a few weeks ago, had been disastrous to put it mildly, and he’d been hoping for another chance ever since.

‘Good point.’ Licking his lips, Jasper flipped up the collar of his rugby shirt. ‘Dylan Taylor better prepare herself for the full-on von Holstadt charm.’