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Opening Extract from...

Glitz

Written by Louise Bagshawe

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Prologue

It was a terrible thing, the old man thought, to be so rich, and to be so bored.

Clement Chambers sat, stretched out on a veranda chair, on the terrace of his mansion in the Seychelles, looking down over the cliffs, across a verdant hillside towards the sea.

His estate had a spectacular view of the azure waters of the Indian Ocean. They lapped against the fine powdery sands of his five-mile-long private beach, a facility he had visited a total of once in the last year. It took up the whole of the rocky inlet viewable from this angle; Clement loathed trespassers on his privacy.

The estate, the Palms, was a fortress. Oh, its walls were concealed, and it was heavily landscaped, but it backed into the sheer rock of the mountain and was surrounded on all sides by discreet and deadly soldiers.

Clement had enemies. You did not get to where he was without them.

He ensured he was safe. Safe from assassins, and kidnappers. He enjoyed the warm weather, the blue skies, the splendid isolation of the tropics. When you were worth several billion dollars, anything you needed in life came to you.

His security firms vetted all his staff. And all his lovers. Every one of them understood the sovereign importance of complete secrecy. Money, and fear, had kept it that way. Not

a whisper of scandal ever reached the outside world.

He watched the waves lap his beach. And his brilliant mind started to plan.

Clement Chambers had a reputation. He was a gentleman, and that mattered immensely to him. He had a coat of arms. Inherited when . . . well, on his brother's death. Even though he had spent three decades in the tropics, surrounded only by lackeys, he was careful to live his life as an Englishman abroad. Rather like Noël Coward. Clement admired Noël Coward. He wore white linen suits and Panama hats. His apparel was designed in St James's and Savile Row. His wine cellar was unsurpassed, his house was hung with glorious English masterpieces including a Stubbs and a Constable. He donated large sums of money to the right charities, and he was a member of London clubs he never set foot in; White's and the Travellers.

For most of his life he had cared about money, and through money, power. Now that the Chambers Corporation was a gargantuan global firm, his pristine reputation mattered more to Clement than anything in the world. The great museums of the world had wings named after him. As did many of the most prestigious hospitals. Sloane-Kettering, in New York, was the latest beneficiary. And if a disgruntled employee, or the loser in some deal, were to complain, or dare to write or broadcast something bad about Clement Chambers, then his overpaid contingent of libel lawyers sprang into action.

He received good press these days.

Nothing but good press.

It was all about protecting that great reputation, Clement thought. But now he was safe, now he was impregnable, he was bored, very bored. It was time to inject a little fun into his life.

Clement Chambers was about to shake things up.

He smiled gently at the prospect. Yes; she would do. She was interesting, so pliant, but so sharp. A tigress.

And he always enjoyed setting the cat amongst the pigeons.

Chapter One

It was *GLITZ* magazine's hottest cover of the year.

A sensational scoop. Never before had they agreed to be photographed together. The women London was obsessed with. The girls every working woman wanted to be.

The fabulous Chambers cousins.

They were living the dream. While the city's career girls stumbled out of bed, snatched breakfast and clambered on to the Tube and buses, ready for another tough day at the office, the Chambers girls were lying in bed, idly preparing themselves for their massages, their shopping sprees, or another celebrity-crammed party. They had the best addresses, the hottest wardrobes, the sharpest haircuts. They were attractive.

And they didn't do one damn thing to earn it.

The public didn't know whether to love them or hate them. But British girls all secretly yearned to *be* them.

The magazine flew off the shelves. On the cover, the Chambers girls posed, styled in long white gowns with gold necklaces and armlets, like the classical goddesses they were named for.

Juno. Tall and statuesque, a gold circlet in her long dark hair, wound into a plait and worn like a crown. Ever insistent on her dignity, a pure cloak of ivory wool fell around her shoulders, to cover her arms. Not as beautiful as the others, but still striking; handsome, perhaps, with cool

blue eyes and pale skin. Queen of the gods; queen of London's snobby social circuit. Her soirées were legendary, her contacts book read like a copy of *Debrett's*. Safely married, Juno was a favourite with society mavens from Sloane Square to Eaton Square, from Ascot to Glyndebourne.

Athena, her little sister. Her scruffy, private identity hidden in the photo shoot, brilliant academic Athena Chambers had the mind – and she had the money. Styled for the fantasy of worker bees everywhere, Athena was unrecognisable; her hair tumbling down her back, professionally made up, her feet forced into unfamiliar heels. The looks she couldn't be bothered about were on display for all to see. Toned arms and an athletic body, an oval face, high cheekbones, and the same luminous gaze as her sister.

Athena was one of her generation's brightest historical scholars. Her pamphlets and essays received wide acclaim. She lived in Oxford in a glorious townhouse, and had no doubt she would become a tenured professor. But not for her the honourable poverty of the brilliant teacher. Her cleverness was buttressed with cash. Athena ate caviar, drank champagne, and had a collection of antiques that could grace a museum.

Across from these two were their cousins. Diana Chambers, her slender arms posing, holding up a golden goblet of wine. Caramel hair, cut into a sharp flame, flowed over her shoulders, complimenting her snowy dress. A little more curvy than Athena, Diana was London's latest greatest 'It Girl'; she had no more intention of working than her cousin Juno, but stuffy high society bored her to death. Diana Chambers meant *style*. She attended every hot play, every great film premiere. She was seen at impossible-to-get-into exhibitions by London's hottest artists. If she was photographed wearing a new designer, sales would soar.

And her parties were stuffed with the funkiest novelists, musicians, photographers, and models. Diana Chambers had made partying an art form. She was the Victoria Beckham of the cognoscenti – if she touched something, it was in style. First-year film students, the backstage crowd at London Fashion Week, the journalists on the glossy magazines – they all wanted to be like Diana. She was the new Chloë Sevigny. And everybody knew that Diana Chambers, someday soon, would simply select a billionaire of her own and marry him. It was just a matter of time.

And right in the front – of course – Venus. Staring brazenly into the camera, her thousand-watt smile seducing millions of readers. A shimmering, pearlescent robe did little to conceal her golden skin and curvy breasts. Wasp-waisted, Venus had expensively dyed flaxen-blond hair. The Chambers diamonds, a family heirloom, glittered brilliantly around her throat and on her lobes. She was eight and a half stone of gorgeous, and she absolutely adored the camera.

Venus Chambers was a little slice of Hollywood in Notting Hill. As toned, tanned and blonde as any airhead model on the Sunset Strip, she was perfectly groomed and perfectly gorgeous. She was an actress, and didn't you know it. Even if Venus was far more famous for being one of the Chambers girls than for any acting she'd ever done. You took one look at the confident, flirty butterfly on the cover of *GLITZ* and you felt it couldn't be long. Venus's big break as a film star would be along any minute. Because that was how life worked when you were a Chambers girl.

You lived in paradise. Where nothing ever went wrong.

Inside the glossy covers, there were more pictures of the girls, their jewels, their fast cars, their stylish homes. Less of Athena, who didn't present herself well. But the other three posed in depth, and the mag got a stylish silhouette shot of

Athena, her wild hair blowing around her on a blustery Oxford day, walking into the Bodleian Library. There was a long puff piece about their likes and dislikes, and their close cousinly relationship. But the magazine really sold on its daring. *GLITZ* actually published photos of the Seychelles. The crystal-blue waters, the white sands and palm trees, and the lush forests on the hills. That generic shit was as close as they would get to the source of all the girls' wealth . . .

Clement Chambers. Their uncle. Multi-billionaire. Reclusive genius. Head of the Chambers Corporation, a multinational with interests from diamond mines to oil wells, mobile phones to construction. Clement Chambers, respected across the world as a man of substance. Somebody not to be messed with. Unmarried, childless and elderly, he guarded his privacy as fiercely as armed soldiers guarded his vast estate on the tropical island. The Chambers girls were his nieces.

And they were well looked after.

Their glamorous lifestyles were funded entirely by him. Half a million a year, every year, to burn through as they wished. The magic of their uncle's name. And the prospect that between them, these four women would one day inherit his colossal fortune. A sum that made their trust fund look like peanuts.

It was a fairytale. Four upper-class girls with little money to their name. Venus and Diana were orphans, Juno and Athena the children of impoverished professors. And one day, when they were in their teens, their rich, reclusive uncle appears and announces he will take care of his nieces' finances.

Every January, the money poured into the four bank accounts. Every December, it was exhausted. But why worry? the article pointed out gaily. Plenty more where that came from!

The fabulous Chambers girls were the only people allowed into their uncle's compound, other than his staff. The private Mr Chambers, the journalist wrote breathlessly, summoned them every 15 December. They stayed for Christmas, and left after Boxing Day. That was the only contact they had with their uncle, all year round.

Right now they were rich.

One day they'd be tycoons.

And all for doing nothing.

Thousands of secretaries, teachers, florists, nurses and bankers picked up their copies of *GLITZ*, flipped the pages, and sighed with longing.

Trust-fund princess. Nice work if you could get it.

Chapter Two

'Telegram, madam.'

Diana looked up from the pile of gold-edged heavy cream cards that she was sorting into lots. Seating plans. They were the work of the devil. She'd been at this chart for hours, and it still wasn't perfect.

'What do you mean, telegram?' She smiled up at her butler, Ferris, an old dear she'd inherited when she bought the flat. It was such fun to have a proper butler. Nobody else her age had any staff other than a nanny, or possibly a life coach. But Diana Chambers knew how to do style.

She shrugged, a little slither of cream silk and palest peach cashmere, delicate mother-of-pearl bangles jangling on her tanned skin. 'Nobody sends telegrams any more. Unless it's a wedding.'

'I believe it comes from the Seychelles, madam,' said Ferris, his wrinkled face inscrutable.

'Of course,' Diana said at once. 'Uncle Clem. He would, I suppose.'

A light frown crossed her pretty face. They had only just finished the Christmas celebrations. She wasn't due back for a year.

What could Clement want?

'I hope he's not ill,' Diana said with genuine concern, taking the brown envelope from the silver tray. 'Thank you, Ferris.'

She ripped it open.

Dear Diana,

I require your presence back at the Palms. In fact, I will need to see you and all the girls here at once. Pack a suitcase and take the next plane out. This afternoon, from Stansted. It's a family matter. Don't bother calling – I prefer to tell you all face to face.

Yours ever,
Uncle Clem

Diana jumped up from her Mies van der Rohe sofa, architecturally tilted backwards at just the right angle on metal poles. Adrenalin pumped through her. She looked all around her, drinking the place in, as though she might lose it. After two years of work, Diana's duplex flat was absolutely perfect; two thousand square feet of prime Kensington terrace, brilliantly redecorated to her own design. She had personally selected everything, from the reclaimed Victorian fireplace to the Carrera marble in the wetroom, skilfully mixing classical pieces with the best of modern design. She'd wanted all her glitterati friends to be jealous, and it had worked. They were.

And not just of her impeccable taste and packed parties. Diana was single and very good-looking, with the money and flair to work it to the full. But unlike most of the girls on the circuit, she didn't have to marry some crusty old financier or weak-chinned landed aristocrat to bag her place in moneyed society.

Diana Chambers had the best of everything.

And a very rich uncle to pay for it.

So much better, she reminded herself, than interfering old parents who might try to keep tabs on her life, her alcohol consumption, or worse still, her shoe budget.

Rupert and Hester Chambers were dead. Diana knew

them only through photographs; a handsome young couple, he tall and blond, she slender and dark but with an attractive touch of baby fat still around her face. Hester smiled a lot and had retained her dimples. They beamed at her, in their ugly sixties wedding outfits, from the steps of the Brompton Oratory. Rupert had loved fast cars, and his dodgy second-hand Aston Martin had skidded and killed them both on an icy road in Gloucestershire on New Year's Day, when Diana was just two and a half years old. They had been coming back from the pub. She didn't remember that day, but she'd always resented that part of the story; the suggestion always was that Daddy had taken a couple of drinks. Careless. Selfish. When he killed them, he left a hole in their lives.

That betrayal placed her and Venus first in the sole care of their crotchety maternal grandmother, and then at boarding school.

Just as well. Elspeth Heckles, their grandmother, who found it hard to cope with the loss of her daughter and the arrival of two young toddlers, was permanently exhausted and cross. The sisters struggled along in her small rented house on the edge of the New Forest, their modest inheritance saved by Elspeth with great discipline so that they might attend a good school. She did her duty, and two months after Venus began to board, at the age of eleven, Elspeth died, leaving the girls little but her personal effects.

School provided structure, and a succession of parent substitutes, none of them much good. Diana and Venus learned to take care of themselves. But they were in separate years, and as they grew older, they grew further apart. When you're a teenager, two years is a world of difference.

The executors of their parents' will arranged for the sisters to stay at school during the holidays, where a skeleton staff looked after the various stragglers still in the building;

the forlorn daughters of diplomats posted to dangerous hotspots, girls who needed remedial holiday coaching, and the daughters of some of the teachers who lived on site. Diana and Venus, unlike all their friends, dreaded the school holidays. They hung together at those times as best they could, but longed for a return to normality.

People. Light. Noise. Diana hated abandonment, she liked to be in a crowd. And Venus dealt with life even more simply: she flashed her beautiful smile, dyed her long hair blond and flirted with the entire world. If you couldn't get love, Diana thought with pity, adulation was an acceptable substitute.

But when she was fifteen, the telegram came. The telegram that changed their lives.

Uncle Clem.

Diana flashed back on that moment now, as she held this opened telegram in her lap. She'd forgotten. Of course. Telegrams were Clem's choice of communication, his style; no emails or faxes from him, at least not to family.

Venus had come running up to her after lunch, as the girls streamed out of the refectory. Thirteen years old now, to Diana's fifteen, and turning into a real beauty.

'Di, Di!'

'Hiya.' She had been feeling down that day, and slipped an arm around her little sister's shoulders, giving her a hug. 'What's going on?'

'Did you get that telegram?'

Diana blinked. 'What?'

'That brown envelope,' Venus said. She tugged impatiently at Diana's arm. 'Come on, come to the pigeonholes. I got one, tell me if it's fake, go on.'

Only mildly curious – her sister was always exuberant – Diana trotted along to the wall of pigeonholes, marked out for each girl by surname. Venus's was empty, but Diana

noted there was a slim brown envelope in hers. She took it out, examined it. It actually was a telegram. She'd heard them read out at weddings, back when Granny dragged her along to them. But who used them in real life?

'Open it,' Venus pleaded. 'It *says* it's from Uncle Clem.'

Now she had her sister's complete attention.

Diana froze. 'Uncle Clem?'

Elspeth had talked about him, once or twice, and not in approving terms. Their distant, long-lost relation. Their father's elder brother, who had made a fortune, cut off his family, and left England to live on some tropical island. Nobody heard from him, not even a card at Christmas.

Excitedly, she ripped the envelope open. The telegram was printed in pale grey letters, on that particular kind of paper. She read it aloud.

Dear Diana and Venus,
Now that your cousin Juno, the eldest of my nieces, is sixteen years old, I am establishing a trust fund for the welfare of the four of you. The money will be administered in your minority by my solicitors and will pay for staff and housing. Upon your eighteenth birthdays, you will come into an annual allowance of half a million pounds a year

'My God!' Diana said. She gripped Venus's arm.

'Is it true, Di?' Venus was breathless with excitement. 'Do you think it's true?'

Diana didn't answer; she read on.

which you will then be able to spend as you like. From this summer, you and Venus will live in my house in Eaton Square in London, with some of my permanent staff to attend you. Treat them as staff. I do not encourage familiarity.

'I – it sounds like he means it,' Diana said. Her head was spinning, and she felt sick with nerves, as though she wanted to vomit. 'Oh God, Venus!'

I intend to take charge of family arrangements. Your cousins Juno and Athena Chambers will be joining you at your school.

Venus pulled a face. 'Don't like them much.'

You are to remember at all times that you carry my name and will now be associated with me. I shall remain in the Seychelles but will be keeping a weather eye on your progress; you will not contact me. If I wish, I will contact you. I rarely make requests, but when I do, I expect to have them granted.

Yours ever,
Clement Chambers

Diana leaned her shoulder against the wooden boxes of the pigeonholes.

'London,' she said. 'Our own house. London parties. *Half a million a year*.'

'If it's true, we'll never have to get a job!' Venus was ecstatic. 'Never! Oh Di, stuff my bloody geography homework, I'm not doing it. Who cares? I don't have to do anything I don't want to!'

'No, no.' Diana hurried to put her straight. 'He said we reflect him, you have to go on as before, nothing wild.'

'If it's true, I *love* Uncle Clem,' Venus said happily. 'I'm going to write and tell him I love him and tell him thank you. What do you think he's like, do you think he looks like Dad?'

Diana watched her eager little sister's young face glowing and felt a little sad.

'No, darling, read it again. Uncle Clem doesn't want us to contact him.'

'But why?'

Diana shrugged. Why had her father got drunk and then got into his car? Why had he done it, left her and Venus alone? The ache that never went away.

'You remember what Granny used to say. That's just how he is. I think we'd better go along with it.'

And they had. All of it. The large house, where they didn't fraternise with the servants, but did meet their friends. They even looked forward to holidays. Life got easier. Diana noticed the impact of money right away. Noticed how everybody started sucking up to them . . . And then they had to deal with the arrival of their cousins. Scruffy, bookish Athena and withdrawn Juno, boasting two living parents.

In deference to Uncle Clem's wishes, the four girls socialised. But they were all in different years, so there was a merciful gap. The cousins were courteous, but not particularly close. Diana and Venus envied Juno and Athena their parents, and Juno and Athena, in turn, envied their cousins their independence.

Clem's money sometimes seemed the strongest bond they had. Even at fifteen, and not receiving any of it actually in her pocket, Diana knew better than to jeopardise that cash. She and Venus may have been a little arrogant, and indolent, but they *always* did just as Uncle Clem wanted.

They had never met the man. But he was the most powerful influence in their lives.

It was only on her eighteenth birthday that things changed for good. Diana was summoned to London to be

shown her new bank account, with its starting balance for the year.

Just as promised. Five hundred thousand pounds.

And with it, the need to actually go and see Uncle Clem – every Christmas. The telegram came to inform the cousins that in future they'd be spending two weeks every December, every Christmas, in the tropics. No other relatives invited.

Diana was not sentimental – how could she be? Christmas in the Seychelles was a chance to get out of cold, wet London.

It was also a chance to avoid the annual lull in the social scene. Christmas and New Year, a tortuous, inevitable break in the London party circuit. An almost vicious reminder of the fragility of friendship, how when the chips were down, it always came second; Diana's girlfriends and drinking buddies all dispersed like seeds from a dandelion clock, drifting back to estates in Gloucestershire, houses in Sussex, farms in Yorkshire, apartments in Manhattan – wherever the parents, or in-laws, lived. Friends didn't matter a bit when family – parents, children, grannies, fiancés – pressed their prior claim.

Christmas and New Year were the worst times for Diana Chambers, growing up. Venus said she didn't care, but how could that be true? Their cousins had them to stay every year. Diana had to endure it; watching Juno and Athena laugh with their mummy and daddy, pretending to like the lame presents that were all the professors could afford, and feeling guilty because she knew perfectly well that everybody meant to be kind. The loss of her mum and dad coloured every second, every moment of Diana's life.

But when Clement called them for Christmas, Diana was on an equal footing with Athena and Juno. And if they

rubbed each other the wrong way, well, so what? At least now she was in the sun, and the four cousins were equals – all just Clement's nieces. However domineering and grouchy he was, Diana was grateful for that.

Uncle Clem's money protected Diana's whole life. The thought of anything changing that prickled the hairs on the back of her neck. Her stomach churned anxiously.

Screw the party. She had to go.

Athena, Juno, and Venus would all have received their own telegrams; Uncle Clem was *such* an old drama queen.

Diana sighed. Her schedule was jam-packed. And the press were supposed to be coming to the soirée tomorrow. She'd harangued, pleaded and bribed them into showing up; there would be a healthy sprinkling of society columnists and photographers. Diana was just starting to get some column inches, after much work and toil and rivers of champagne. Staying London's top It Girl took a lot of work. It wasn't enough to be rich; she also wanted to be famous. Not, like Venus, famous for being an actress or a model. Diana wanted to be famous just for being Diana. That was one role she'd never lose.

The party was supposed to go a long way towards her social ascent. Lots of juicy coverage and society-page pics. The *GLITZ* cover was a milestone. Diana wanted to follow it up.

But Uncle Clem had called.

There was nothing else for it.

'Ferris!' Diana called lightly.

He was with her in a second.

'Yes, madam?'

'Cancel the party at Cho's, would you?'

Behind the laconic request lay a solid morning's work. It would mean hundreds of calls, irate suppliers, and explanations to journalists and paparazzi. But the rich young

woman paid well, and her butler's expression never flickered.

'Very good, madam.'

'Family emergency. Tell them that. I have to be on a plane.' Diana glanced apologetically at her thick pile of cards. 'Sorry for the bother, Ferris, but you understand, don't you?'

Indeed he did. For Diana Chambers didn't have a bean. Uncle Clement's cash paid for everything.

For Diana. For her beautiful, untalented sister Venus. For the cousins, scruffy Athena and snobby Juno. Each rolling in money, not a penny of it their own.

When Uncle Clement called, they came.

Diana picked up the phone. Time to call her cousins.