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Opening Extract from...

Too Cruel for School

Written by Kate Kingsley

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Young, loaded and fabulous

Too CRUEL for SCHOOL

KATE KINGSLEY

headline

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Chapter 1

The antique sofa in Alice Rochester's bedroom groaned as Jemimah Calthorpe de Vyle-Hanswicke flopped on to its spindly frame.

'St Cecilia's is totally going to kick me out on Monday and then I'll be an outcast for the rest of my life!' Mimah moaned, her voice muffled by the couch's lilac silk cushions. 'I'll be the most disgraced person in London. Everyone will be bad-mouthing me – I should probably just curl up and die right now.'

'Mmm. Yeah.' Alice glanced at her watch. Typical. Mimah always chose the most inconvenient times to sink into her moods. Like right now, at quarter to ten on Saturday night, when Alice had thirty seconds to get her out the door, into a black London cab, and on their way.

'OK; that's it.' She clapped her hands. 'Get up. I'm not wasting my entire weekend sitting at home. Plus, you need cheering up. We're going to Kiki Club.'

'Kiki's?' Mimah grimaced. 'You're joking, right?'

Alice was never what you'd call a sympathetic friend, but she could at least be making a bit more of an effort tonight. Tomorrow was Mimah's last official day of suspension from

St Cecilia's boarding school, and her future wasn't exactly looking rosy. A week ago, she'd been caught carrying drugs in the woods near school and had been dragged off to the headmistress's office for a serious showdown. '*Suspension with the possibility of expulsion*' had been the verdict, accompanied by a storm of reproaches like 'severely disappointed', 'betrayal of trust', and, Mimah's personal favourite, 'disgrace to your parents and friends'.

Mimah sighed. It was all so unfair. For a start, she hadn't even been taking the drugs. She'd never even *intended* to take them; she'd just confiscated them from her fourteen-year-old sister, Charlie, who'd stupidly stolen them from their mum's medicine cabinet. But, in a moment of heroism, Mimah had decided to swallow the blame. Surely it was better to save her little sister's future than her own?

Or maybe not. Maybe heroism was an overrated concept.

A bundle of beige cashmere landed in Mimah's arms.

'Coat,' Alice said. 'Put it on. Hat. Scarf. Bag. Let's go.'

'Who lit a fire under your arse?' Mimah protested, as she was practically shoved out the front door of the Rochesters' magnificent Kensington town house, through the garden, and into the street, which was lined with bare December trees. 'And by the way, did you hear me agree to come to Kiki's? I thought we were staying in with a bottle of wine and a stack of rom coms.'

'Boring,' Alice snorted. 'Change of plan.'

'In your head,' Mimah retorted. Then her eyes widened. 'Unbelievable!'

'What?'

Mimah pointed at Alice's outfit. 'I should have known you were never staying in with me. I mean, an Hervé Leger bandage dress? Yeah, great TV-watching gear.' She gestured at her own black leggings and belted shirt. 'This just proves I can't come – I look like someone's household staff. Ugh, I am so not in the mood for a bar packed with random people. I'm going home.'

'No!' Alice hailed a passing taxi. If Mimah took off now, all her plans for the evening would be ruined. She'd spent most of the past few days coordinating every last detail for tonight, and she did not intend to look like a fool. 'Your outfit's super-chic. I mean, yeah – haven't you heard? Grunge is back. Now get in. You have to.'

'Why?'

'Because I said so, silly. Pretty please, Mimey? Kiki Club coconutinis on me . . .'

'Oh, wonderful,' Mimah grumbled, ''cause there's nothing a coconutini can't fix.' But arguing was futile – when Alice had her heart set on something, only a miracle could change her mind. So Mimah slumped back against the cab's grey leather seat and tried to relax. It didn't work – obviously. Nothing was comforting enough to distract her from Monday's impending doom: not the familiar rasp of the taxi's diesel engine; not the tones of Laura Marling drifting from the driver's radio; not even the holiday lights twinkling overhead like necklaces against the night sky.

'Who are you texting?' she asked suddenly. Alice had slipped out her phone and was covering the screen as she typed.

'What? No one,' Alice said, shoving her phone back in her pocket. She craned her neck at the web of electric stars winking over Sloane Square, clearly straining to change the subject. 'They always do a stunning job on the Christmas decorations in our part of town, don't they?'

Mimah shrugged. 'I guess.'

'Not that it's surprising. After all, families like ours wouldn't stand for it if they didn't. Shit – can you believe Christmas is in less than four weeks? And it's less than three weeks till we're out of school! I can't wait.'

'Yeah. Me neither. If I still have a school to be out of.'

'Babe, could you stop being such a downer?' Alice kicked Mimah with one of her green patent leather wedges. 'Look on the bright side: whatever happens, you're still invited to come to Jasper's ski chalet for New Year.'

'Wow, *thanks*. And there I was, assuming that if I got expelled I'd be dumped by all my best friends and barred from every guest list.'

'You know that's not what I meant.' Alice rolled her eyes. 'I was only trying to be encouraging. Come on, Mime – you're almost seventeen – you've got to stop allowing every little thing to get you down.'

Mimah clenched her teeth. Perhaps she should point out that the threat of being expelled from one of England's oldest and most exclusive boarding schools was hardly a 'little thing'. But no – there was no point. Alice wouldn't get it; she'd never had to deal with anything adverse in her life. Literally the worst thing that had ever happened to her was having bad sex with her boyfriend, Tristan

Murray-Middleton, a couple of weeks ago. And bad sex wasn't exactly unusual – especially when it was your first time.

Mimah sneaked a glance at her friend. 'So . . .' she began, unscrewing the cap of her lip gloss, 'how come you didn't want to see Tristan tonight?'

'Huh? Oh . . . 'Cause I wanted to see *you*, babe.'

'Yeah, right, suck-up. How's T doing?'

'Fine, I guess'. Alice picked a piece of invisible fluff off her Aubin & Wills coat. She hadn't seen Tristan since she'd visited him in hospital last weekend, just after he'd been injured in a terrifying rugby accident. 'I mean, he's recovering from concussion and a broken collarbone – it's not like he's gonna go climbing Mount Everest any time soon. Maybe he'll think twice before he plays rugby again.'

'Sure he will,' Mimah snorted. As someone who was majorly into her sports, she knew exactly how Tristan felt about his. 'Seriously, though, the Paper Bandits argument – are you over it?'

Alice shrugged. The Paper Bandits were Tristan's band, and he was their lead singer. Obviously Alice was proud to have a boyfriend with star quality – but not when it blinded him to everything else. Like, how important *she* was. Which was precisely what had happened a couple of weeks ago: straight after they'd had sex for the first time, T had started acting like he cared more about his band's success than about the fact that Alice had just lost her virginity. And that wasn't just hurtful – it was humiliating.

'Actually, I'm still quite pissed off,' she sighed, biting

her lip at the memory. 'I mean, can you blame me? What kind of guy pays more attention to his guitar than to his girlfriend?'

Mimah smirked. 'Every single seventeen-year-old guy I know?'

'Whatever.' Alice allowed herself half a grin. 'I suppose I can't hold it against him for too long while he's in a sling, anyway. How bitchy would I look if I was nasty to an invalid? I'd be like, *persona non grata*.' Flicking her long, dark hair, she sneaked a glance towards the front seat. Hopefully the cab driver had heard that little Latin gem. It really was impressive what a private school education could do for your vocabulary.

Mimah clicked shut her Lulu Guinness handbag and leaned closer. The tiny mole under her left eye drew level with Alice's face and made it look like she was winking. 'OK, babe, you know what I really want to know.' Her look was expectant. 'Spill it.'

'Spill what?'

'Hello? In bed . . . I mean, T's practically immobile – it's gotta be bizarre, right? Tell me everything! Have you two done it again?'

'Maybe.'

'OMG, that *totally* means you haven't.'

'No! It means, "shut up and mind your own business." Just 'cause you don't have a boyfriend, you don't have to, like, live through *my* love life.'

'Come on, Al – don't be mean. I know it wasn't great the first time, but you were a virgin, and—'

'Shut *up*!' Alice's face was as red as a hot coal. 'Would you mind not informing the cab driver about every secret of my sex life?'

Luckily, before things could get any more excruciating, the taxi swung into a side street off King's Road and rumbled to a halt.

'Kiki Club, haunt of the rich and famous,' the driver announced, switching off his meter with a flourish.

Alice gazed at the carved palm trees heralding the entrance to the bar, at the caffeine-buzzed paparazzi drooling for a celeb sighting, and at the crowd of pretty young things jostling inside the velvet ropes. Swallowing, she checked her watch again. Tonight better go well – and she meant that about more things than one.

Chapter 2

'Why did I agree to this?' Mimah scowled under her blunt black fringe. She batted a dangling palm frond out of her eyes and trailed Alice through Kiki Club, trying to avoid the hula-skirted waitresses balancing trays of blue and orange cocktails as they weaved between the bamboo tables.

'C'mere, pretty lady,' mouthed a floppy-haired boy whose jeans were hanging off his boxer shorts. He stumbled into Mimah's path, gliding towards her in time to the sultry Buddha-Bar-style lounge music. His eyes were half-closed, either because he was under the mistaken impression that this was sexy, or because he was too wasted to keep them open. 'Yeah, baby, want a snog?' he whispered, shimmying closer, his head bobbing on his skinny neck.

'Fuck off,' Mimah snapped. She shoved the boy's pink-shirt-clad chest and watched him flail backwards into a row of carved tiki masks. *Bullseye.* Mimah smirked. Obviously all that lacrosse she'd been playing was toning up her arm muscles.

Her shoulders drooped. Lacrosse – yet another thing she shouldn't be thinking about. After Monday, there

wouldn't be any more school sports. No more captaining the Lower-Sixth team. No more rowdy coach trips to away matches. No more galloping down the groomed St Cecilia's fields, her yellow and grey school scarf tailing out behind her. Mimah put her hands to her face. Suddenly, Kiki Club felt like a cage: cramped, hot, full of screeching inmates. She needed some air. Or, at the very least, a drink.

'Whoo!' Alice cried. She bumped Mimah with a skinny hip. 'Babe, stop acting like a corpse and dance. Hey – I wonder what's back here?'

'Who cares?' Mimah shrugged. Alice was heading straight past the bar towards an artfully ripped skull-and-crossbones flag. Behind it, there seemed to be some kind of hidden private lounge.

'Doesn't this look mysterious?' Alice brushed her hand over the flag so that the candlelight glowing through it shimmered on the wall.

'Um, no? It's just a VIP room. I need some booze. Come on.'

'Hmmm, I don't know . . .' Alice scratched her chin. 'I kind of want to stay here. I think it looks like a . . . *pirate shiiip!*' she bellowed, practically howling the last two words.

Mimah leapt into the air. 'What the hell—'

'Surprise!'

The flag flew aside and a crowd stampeded out, sloshing tropical cocktails, waving streamers and cheering at the top of their lungs. In the lead was Alice's best mate, Tally Abbott, strands of her white-blond hair whipping back towards Sonia Khan, who was pumping her arms like a

crazed marathoner, trying as hard as she could to get to the front. Behind the girls burst Tristan Murray-Middleton, Seb Ogilvy, Jasper von Holstadt, George Demetrios and Tom Randall-Stubbs – the Hasted House gang.

'Smile, babies,' Sonia said, whipping out her state-of-the-art video camera. Sonia's life ambition was to storm Hollywood and be the best director the universe had ever seen. Shame her only projects so far amounted to stalkerish home videos of her friends, and an unfinished documentary about the Paper Bandits.

'Group hug!' George roared.

Mimah gasped as she felt her feet leave the floor. 'Help! G-guys, seriously. It's awesome to see you but . . . I don't get it. It's not my birthday. I-Is it?'

'Duh, silly,' Alice laughed, elbowing her way into the middle of the group. She smacked a kiss on Mimah's cheek. 'But it *is* your last night out before judgment day, and I wanted to make it special.'

'Ali, you mean this was *your* plan?'

'Of course it was Al's plan!' Tally butted in. She passed Mimah a coconut with a fat pink straw sticking out of it. 'Do you think anyone else would have been anal enough to organise this? Ow!' she giggled, as Alice's Marni wedge landed on her toes. 'So, come on, Mime, how surprised are you? On a scale of one to ten.'

'Twenty. I almost died of shock.'

'Perfect. Now at least if you get chucked out on Monday, you'll have happy memories to keep you warm. Enjoy your last night out as a St Cecilia's girl, OK?'

Alice rolled her eyes. But before she could tell Tally to shut up a familiar chuckle sounded behind her.

'Good old Tals and her natural tact,' commented a boy's voice.

Alice's body stiffened like a tripwire. Tristan. This was only the second time they'd been in the same room since their argument a couple of weeks ago – and that argument had been so bad it had almost been a break-up. Her eyes flew towards his – but just as their gazes met, Dizzee Rascal blasted over the speakers.

'Tune!' hooted Jasper. 'Dance with me, people.' Grabbing Tally, Mimah and Sonia, he leapt on to one of the VIP couches and cocked his houndstooth fedora at a jaunty angle. 'Rando,' he bellowed, 'get up here!'

'Budge over, then.'

Alice watched as Tom Randall-Stubbs hopped up on to the cushions next to Tally and swung her in his arms.

'Wheee!' Tally shrieked, kissing him.

Alice folded her arms. Those two had been seeing each other ever since Rando's country house party a couple of weeks ago, and it was sort of weirding her out. Not that she could explain why. Maybe it was because Tally had always sworn to date other men rather than boys their age. Or maybe because it was strange to see people splitting into couples – people who weren't her and T, that is. It changed everything when your friends paired off – for a start, they had different loyalties than before. Yeah, you could go on about 'mates before dates' as much as you wanted but, when it came down to it, that wasn't the way things went.