

Chapter 2

Alina's POV

"OMG! You have got to try this new iced coffee at Starbu... Oh, s**t, sorry! I wasn't thinking!"

I rolled my eyes and folded my arms as Chloe stumbled over her words.

"Let's go to Pret instead. They make these chocolate cookies with melt in the middle to die for!"

As we sat down with our orders, Chloe retrieved her iPhone and started to scroll through **. I leaned back in the leather chair and sipped my hot chocolate. The mall was extremely busy for a Friday afternoon and it gave me the perfect opportunity to sit back and partake in my favourite pastime: people watching. I nd the way people walk, the clothing they choose to wear, and how they interact with each other intriguing. Because I don't know them personally, I can imagine a whole life for them. I guess this is one of the reasons I chose to study psychology at university. I nd it so fascinating that you can interact with strangers every minute of the day and yet know nothing about their feelings, darkest secrets or the lives they are living. I wanted to know more.

I was watching a teenage couple who, from their body language, I could only presume, were loved up and on a date, when Chloe pulled me out of my observations.

"I can't believe I forgot to tell you about this, but obviously you've been dealing with your own drama and what not. I must show you this girl that I met last weekend. I follow her on Insta now and she is drop-dead gorgeous, has the best style, and is freaking hilarious in her stories!"

"Great. That's exactly what I need right now, to socially stalk a stunning woman who has her s**t together. I bet she's never been cheated on with a Starbucks waitress," I couldn't help but frown.

"Hey! None of that! Us women have got to stick together! Here she is," Chloe ipped her phone around to reveal what I had to admit was a very attractive woman. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and unique grey eyes that popped with the help of clearly immaculate, skilled makeup. I scrolled down to a few more photos and noticed she was a little alternative with her style and a nose ring, lots of ear piercings and a large tattoo down one of her thighs. But what stood out the most was her complexion and lips. They looked so soft and smooth, almost like porcelain.

"Yeah, she is gorgeous," I agreed, "How did you meet her?" Chloe was always meeting new people. She was what you would call a social butterfly.

"Last weekend when I went to that club, Lavish, with Lucy. She was at the bar when this sleazeball tried groping my ass. She turned around and grabbed him by the balls and said, 'How do you like it?' and twisted them! You should have seen the look on his face! Priceless. Anyway, I thanked her for being such a boss b***h and she said, us girls have got to look out for each other. She then invited me and Lucy to join her friends at their table and they were wild!"

"Is that the night you got in at 5:30am screaming that you had found your girl crush?" I raised my eyebrows at her.

She giggled, "Yeah. Well, I love c**k too much to go there, but if I was going to, it would denitely be with her! Anyway, she's got a hunk of a boyfriend. Right, come on. I've still got a zillion shops to go to before this place closes."

She dragged me up from the table and quickly I shoved the last piece of my cookie in my mouth. I must admit Chloe was right about the cookies. They are to die for!

"You have got to try this on, Lina! The colour will bring out your eyes and it will suit your tanned skin!" She was holding up the smallest bit of material I had ever seen for a dress. It was an emerald shade, made from a silk fabric, and looked rather expensive.

"I think that is lingerie, Chlo. Not a dress," I turned back to the rack and continued to ick through the rows of stylish clothes.

"No, it's a dress and it's incredible. I will not take no for an answer. You are trying it on!" she demanded, pushing me towards the changing rooms with the dress pressed to my chest.

I sighed and gave in, shutting the black, velvet curtain behind me. We were in one of those edgy, urban shops that were full of stylish girls trying to grab the latest trend before they saw someone else in it. I have never really understood it all. I've always been happy in a pair of jeans and a hoody most days and on the rare occasion that I did dress up, it would normally be something I borrow from Chloe. It's not like I didn't like fashion as such, but I worked hard for my money (the little that I had) and refused to splash out on designer clothes.

After my dad left us, it was just mum and me, and between us, we did okay. But when she got sick and could no longer work, I decided to drop out of university and get a full-time job to pay for the house and bills. Unfortunately, after she passed away a year ago, I had to sell my childhood home as I couldn't keep up with the mortgage. I moved straight in with Michael and, well, you saw how that turned out. Here I am, practically homeless, living on my friend's sofa, so spending (I checked the tag...) £150 for this dress is not a good idea.

"Chlo! Do you know how much this dress costs?"

"Stop your whining and get out here! The anticipation is killing me!"

As I slipped the dress over my head, the delicate fabric fell gracefully into place. It clung to all the right places and stopped halfway up my thighs. It had spaghetti straps that crossed at the back and left my entire back open and bare right down to the top of my tail bone where it scooped around. If I had the condence to wear this out in public, I would. I loved it. But where on Earth would I wear such a thing?

"Hurry up, you are taking forever! I need to see!" Chole squealed, snapping me out of my trance.

I took a deep breath before opening the curtain and stepping out.

"WOAH!" Chloe's mouth hung open as she stared at me.

Suddenly, the cubicle next to mine opened and out stepped a stunning girl in a cropped top and tight gure-hugging ripped jeans. I recognised her instantly but couldn't place how I knew her.

"Madeline! Oh, wow, what a small world! Do you remember me? From Lavish?" Chloe was practically hyperventilating at the poor girl like she was an A-list celebrity.

As she turned to take in my excited best friend, I saw her awless features and I had to admit even her photos didn't do her justice. She was curvier than me in all the right places and gave off this light yet powerful aura. She looked Chloe up and down before breaking into a breath-taking smile.

"Yes, it's Chloe, right? How are you? Did you get home okay after the club?"

I noticed a slight American accent in her voice.

"I'm great, thank you! And yes, I did. It was such a good night. Such a laugh! Oh, sorry. This is my friend Alina," Chloe replied as Madeline looked me up and down. I suddenly felt self-conscious in the little clothing I had on.

"Hi," I replied shyly, holding my arms across my chest, trying to cover the little bit of modesty I had left. "Sorry about this. Chlo forced me to try it on and, well, it's denitely not my style, as you can see."

She gazed at me and smiled sweetly. She turned back to Chloe. "What are you and your friend doing tomorrow evening? My boyfriend and I are throwing a house party and I wondered if you would like to come?"

Chloe practically jumped out of her chair.

"Yes! Of course, we would love to come, wouldn't we, Alina?"

"Um... I... er..." I stuttered like an i***t. The last thing I wanted to do in the world right now was go to a party full of attractive people who were all loved up.

"On one condition..." Madeline announced, looking from Chloe to me. "You have to wear that dress to the party."

"What?!" I almost choked.

"It looks incredible on you and I know you won't buy it otherwise. And that would be such a shame," she winked at me and then swiftly gave Chloe a kiss on both cheeks, then she was gone.

I stood there, dumbfounded. Chloe looked at me and a mischievous smile stretched across her face.

"No way. Not happening. I don't even want to go anyway!" I tried to reason with her as she made pleading noises and praying hands.

"I am not buying this dress and the last thing I want to do right now is go to a party. I don't even know the girl!"

"Exactly! You won't know anyone there so you can strut in the place looking hot as f**k and be whoever you want to be for the night! You could be anyone for a whole night and forget all the s**t you've been through recently. Let go and have some fun!"

She had a point and some small part of me loved the idea of being someone else for a night. A girl who wasn't heartbroken, who hadn't lost their mum and their boyfriend in the same year and wasn't living on their best friend's sofa.

"Okay ne," I agreed reluctantly and Chloe dived into my arms, knocking me straight back into the cubicle.

"Great, now let's go pay for that dress!"

I was going to have to keep the tag and try and return it the day after.

The life of a student!