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Opening Extract from...

Mini Shopaholic

Written by Sophie Kinsella

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MINI SHOPAHOLIC

Sophie Kinsella



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Tick Tock Playgroup

The Old Barn
4 Spence Hill
Oxshott
Surrey

Mrs Rebecca Brandon
The Pines
43 Elton Road
Oxshott
Surrey

1 September 2005

Dear Mrs Brandon

We were delighted to meet you and Minnie yesterday. We are sure she will be very happy at our fun, relaxed playgroup and look forward to seeing you next week.

With kind regards

Teri Ashley
Play Leader

P.S. Please don't worry about the minor paint-squirting incident. We are used to children and we can always repaint that wall.

Tick Tock Playgroup

The Old Barn
4 Spence Hill
Oxshott
Surrey

Mrs Rebecca Brandon
The Pines
43 Elton Road
Oxshott
Surrey

4 October 2005

Dear Mrs Brandon

Just a few confidential concerns about Minnie. She's a lovely child with real liveliness.

However, she has to learn that she can't wear *all* the dressing-up clothes every day, and the 'princess' shoes are not suitable for outdoor play. Perhaps we can discuss this at our upcoming parents and children activity morning.

With kind regards

Teri Ashley
Play Leader

P.S. Please don't worry about the minor glue-squirting incident. We are used to children and we can always revarnish that table.

Tick Tock Playgroup

The Old Barn
4 Spence Hill
Oxshott
Surrey

Mrs Rebecca Brandon
The Pines
43 Elton Road
Oxshott
Surrey

9 November 2005

Dear Mrs Brandon

Thank you for your letter. I'm glad you're looking forward to the parents and children activity morning. Unfortunately there will be no dressing-up clothes for adults, nor will there be any facility for 'swapping outfits with other parents' as you suggest.

I'm glad to say that Minnie has broadened her activities in playgroup and is spending a lot of time in our new 'Shop' corner.

With kind regards

Teri Ashley
Play Leader

P.S. Please don't worry about the minor ink-squirting incident. We are used to children and Mrs Soper can always re-dye her hair.

ONE

OK. Don't panic. I'm in charge. I, Rebecca Brandon (née Bloomwood), am the adult. *Not* my two-year-old daughter.

Only I'm not sure she realizes this.

'Minnie, darling, give me the pony.' I try to sound calm and assured, like Nanny Sue off the telly.

'Poneeee.' Minnie grips the toy pony more tightly.

'No pony.'

'Mine!' she cries hysterically. '*Miiiiine* poneeee!'

Aargh. I'm holding about a million shopping bags, my face is sweating, and I could *really* do without this.

It was all going so well. I've been round the whole shopping mall and bought all the last little things on my Christmas list. Minnie and I were heading towards Santa's Grotto, and I only stopped for a moment to look at a dolls' house. Whereupon Minnie grabbed a toy pony off the display and refused to put it back. And now I'm in the middle of Pony-gate.

A mother in J Brand skinny jeans with an impeccably dressed daughter walks past, giving me the Mummy Once-over, and I flinch. Since I had Minnie, I've learned that the Mummy Once-over is even more savage than the Manhattan Once-over. In the Mummy Once-over, they don't just assess and price your clothes to the nearest penny in one sweeping

glance. Oh no. They also take in your child's clothes, pram brand, nappy bag, snack choice and whether your child is smiling, snotty or screaming.

Which I know is a lot to take in, in a one-second glance, but believe me, mothers are multi-taskers.

Minnie definitely scores top marks for her outfit. (Dress: one-off Danny Kovitz; coat: Rachel Riley; shoes: Baby Dior.) And I've got her safely strapped into her toddler reins (Bill Amberg leather, really cool, they were in *Vogue*). But instead of smiling angelically like the little girl in the photoshoot, she's straining against them like a bull waiting to dash into the ring. Her eyebrows are knitted in fury, her cheeks are bright pink and she's drawing breath to shriek again.

'Minnie.' I let go of the reins and put my arms round her so that she feels safe and secure, just like Nanny Sue recommends in her book, *Taming Your Tricky Toddler*. I bought it the other day, to have a flick through. Just out of idle interest. I mean, it's not that I'm having *problems* with Minnie or anything. It's not that she's *difficult*. Or 'out of control and wilful', like that stupid teacher at the toddler music group said. (What does she know? She can't even play the triangle properly.)

The thing about Minnie is, she's . . . spirited. She has firm opinions about things. Like jeans (she won't wear them), or carrots (she won't eat them). And right now her firm opinion is that she should have a toy pony.

'Minnie darling, I love you very much,' I say in a gentle, crooning voice, 'and it would make me very happy if you gave me the pony. That's right, give it to Mummy . . .' I've nearly done it. My fingers are closing around the pony's head . . .

Ha. Skills. I've got it. I can't help looking around to see if anyone's observed my expert parenting.

'Miiiine!' Minnie wrenches the pony out of my arms and makes a run for it across the shop floor. Shit.

'Minnie! MINNIE!' I yell.

I grab my carrier bags and leg it furiously after Minnie, who has already disappeared into the Action Man section. God, I don't know why we bother training up all these athletes

for the Olympics. We should just field a team of toddlers.

As I catch up with her, I'm panting. I really have to start my post-natal exercises sometime.

'Give me the pony!' I try to take it, but she's gripping it like a limpet.

'*Mine* poneee!' Her dark eyes flash at me with a resolute glint. Sometimes I look at Minnie and she's so like her father it gives me a jolt.

Speaking of which, where is Luke? We were supposed to be doing Christmas shopping *together*. As a *family*. But he disappeared an hour ago, muttering something about a call he had to make, and I haven't seen him since. He's probably sitting somewhere having a civilized cappuccino over the newspaper. Typical.

'Minnie, we're not buying it,' I say in my best firm manner. 'You've got lots of toys already and you don't need a pony.'

A woman with straggly dark hair, grey eyes and toddlers in a twin-buggy shoots me an approving nod. I can't help giving her the Mummy Once-over myself, and she's one of those mothers who wears Crocs over nubblly home-made socks. (Why would you do that? Why?)

'It's monstrous, isn't it?' she says. 'Those ponies are forty pounds! My kids know better than to even ask,' she adds, shooting a glance at her two boys, who are slumped silently, thumbs in mouths. 'Once you give in to them, that's the beginning of the end. I've got mine well trained.'

Show off.

'Absolutely,' I say in dignified tones. 'I couldn't agree more.'

'Some parents would just buy their kid that pony for a quiet life. No discipline. It's disgusting.'

'Terrible,' I agree, and make a surreptitious swipe for the pony, which Minnie adeptly dodges. Damn.

'The biggest mistake is giving in to them.' The woman is regarding Minnie with a pebble-like gaze. 'That's what starts the rot.'

'Well, I never give in to my daughter,' I say briskly. 'You're not getting the pony, Minnie, and that's final.'

‘Poneeee!’ Minnie’s wails turn to heart-rending sobs. She is such a drama queen. (She gets it from my mum.)

‘Good luck, then.’ The woman moves off. ‘Happy Christmas.’

‘Minnie, stop it!’ I hiss furiously as soon as she’s disappeared. ‘You’re embarrassing both of us! What do you want a stupid pony for, anyway?’

‘Poneeee!’ She’s cuddling the pony to her as though it’s her long-lost faithful pet that was sold at market five hundred miles away and has just stumbled back to the farm, footsore and whickering for her.

‘It’s just a silly toy,’ I say impatiently. ‘What’s so special about it, anyway?’

And for the first time I look properly at the pony.

Wow. Actually . . . it is pretty fab. It’s made of painted white wood with little glittery stars all over, and has the sweetest hand-painted face. And it has little red trundly wheels.

‘You really don’t need a pony, Minnie,’ I say – but with slightly less conviction than before. I’ve just noticed the saddle. Is that genuine leather? And it has a proper bridle with buckles and the mane is made of real horse hair. *And* it comes with a grooming set!

For forty quid this isn’t bad value at all. I push one of the little red wheels, and it spins round perfectly. And now I think about it, Minnie doesn’t actually have a toy pony. It’s quite an obvious gap in her toy cupboard.

I mean, not that I’m going to *give in*.

‘It winds up, too,’ comes a voice behind me, and I turn to see an elderly sales assistant approaching us. ‘There’s a key in the base. Look!’

She winds the key, and both Minnie and I watch, mesmerized, as the pony starts rising and falling in a carousel motion, while tinkly music plays.

Oh my God, I *love* this pony.

‘It’s on special Christmas offer at forty pounds,’ the assistant adds. ‘Normally, this would retail for seventy. They’re hand-made in Sweden.’

Nearly 50 per cent off. I *knew* it was good value. Didn't I say it was good value?

'You like it, don't you, dear?' The assistant smiles at Minnie, who beams back, her stropiness vanished. In fact, I don't want to boast, but she looks pretty adorable with her red coat and dark pigtails and dimpled cheeks. 'So, would you like to buy one?'

'I . . . um . . .' I clear my throat.

Come on, Becky. Say no. Be a good parent. Walk away.

My hand steals out and strokes the mane again.

But it's so *gorgeous*. Look at its dear little face. And a pony isn't like some stupid craze, is it? You'd never get tired of a pony. It's a classic. It's, like, the Chanel jacket of toys.

And it's Christmas. And it's on special offer. And who knows, Minnie might turn out to have a gift for riding, it suddenly occurs to me. A toy pony might be just the spur she needs. I have a sudden vision of her aged twenty, wearing a red jacket, standing by a gorgeous horse at the Olympics, saying to the TV cameras, 'It all began one Christmas, when I received the gift that changed my life . . .'

My mind is going round and round like a computer processing DNA results, trying to find a match. There has to be a way in which I can simultaneously: 1. Not give in to Minnie's tantrum, 2. Be a good parent and 3. Buy the pony. I need some clever blue-sky solution like Luke is always paying business consultants scads of money to come up with . . .

And then the answer comes to me. A totally genius idea which I can't *believe* I've never had before. I haul out my phone and text Luke:

Luke! Have just had a really good thought. I think Minnie should get pocket money.

Immediately a reply pings back: **Wtf? Why?**

So she can buy things, of course! I start to type – then think again. I delete the text and carefully type instead:

Children need to learn about finance from early age. Read it in article. Empowers them and gives responsibility.

A moment later Luke texts: Can't we just buy her the FT?
 Shut up, I type. We'll say two pounds a week shall we?
 R u mad? comes zipping back. 10p a week is plenty.
 I stare at the phone indignantly. 10p? He's such an old skinflint. What's she supposed to buy with that?
 And we'll never afford the pony on 10p a week.
 50p a week, I type firmly, is national average. (He'll never check.) Where r u anyway? Nearly time for Father Christmas!!
 OK, whatever. I'll be there, comes the reply.
 Result! As I put away my phone, I'm doing a quick mental calculation. 50p a week for two years makes £52. Easily enough. God, why on earth have I never thought of pocket money before? It's perfect! It's going to add a whole new dimension to our shopping trips.
 I turn to Minnie, feeling rather proud of myself.
 'Now listen, darling,' I announce. 'I'm not going to buy this pony for you, because I've already said no. But as a special treat, you can buy it for yourself out of your *own pocket money*. Isn't that exciting?'

Minnie eyes me uncertainly. I'll take that as a yes.
 'As you've never spent any of your pocket money, you've got two years' worth, which is plenty. You see how great saving is?' I add brightly. 'You see how fun it is?'

As we walk to the check-out I feel totally smug. Talk about responsible parenting. I'm introducing my child to the principles of financial planning at an early age. I could be a guru on TV myself! *Super Becky's Guide to Fiscally Responsible Parenting*. I could wear different boots in each episode—

'Wagon.'

I'm jolted out of my daydream to see that Minnie has dropped the pony and is now clutching a pink plastic monstrosity. Where did she get that? It's Winnie's Wagon, from that cartoon show.

'Wagon?' She raises her eyes hopefully.
 What?

'We're not getting the wagon, darling,' I say patiently. 'You wanted the pony. The lovely *pony*, remember?'

Minnie surveys the pony with total indifference. 'Wagon.'

'Pony!' I grab the pony off the floor.

This is so frustrating. How can she be so fickle? She definitely gets that trait from Mum.

'Wagon!'

'Pony!' I cry, more loudly than I meant to, and brandish the pony at her. 'I want the *poneee*—'

Suddenly I get a prickly-neck feeling. I look round to see the woman with toddler boys, standing a few yards away, staring at me with her pebble-like eyes.

'I mean . . .' I hastily lower the pony, my cheeks burning. 'Yes, you *may* buy the pony out of your pocket money. Basic financial planning,' I add briskly to the pebble-eyed woman. 'What we learned today is that you have to *save up* before you can buy things, didn't we, darling? Minnie's spent all her pocket money on the pony, and it was a very good choice . . .'

'I've found the other pony!' The assistant suddenly appears again, breathless and carrying a dusty box. 'I knew we had one left in the stock room. They were originally a pair, you see . . .'

There's *another* pony?

I can't help gasping as she draws it out. It's midnight blue with a raven mane, speckled with stars, and with golden wheels. It's absolutely stunning. It complements the other one perfectly. Oh God, we have to have them both. We *have* to.

Rather annoyingly, the pebble-eyed woman is still standing there with her buggy, watching us.

'Shame you've spent all your pocket money, isn't it?' she says to Minnie with one of those tight, unfriendly smiles which proves she never has any fun or sex. You can always tell that about people, I find.

'Yes, isn't it?' I say politely. 'That's a problem. So we'll just have to think of a solution.' I think hard for a moment, then turn to Minnie.

'Darling, here's your second important lesson in financial planning. Sometimes, when we see an amazing, one-off

bargain, we can make an *exception* to the saving-up rule. It's called "Seizing the Opportunity".'

'You're just going to *buy* it?' says the woman in tones of disbelief.

What business is it of hers? God, I hate other mothers. They always have to butt in. The minute you have a child it's as if you've turned into a box on an internet site, saying 'Please add all your rude and offensive comments here.'

'Of course I'm not going to *buy* it,' I say, a little stonily. 'She'll have to get it out of her own pocket money. Darling,' I crouch down to get Minnie's attention, 'if you pay for the other pony out of your pocket money at 50p a week, it'll take about . . . sixty weeks. You'll have to have an advance. Like an "overdraft".' I enunciate clearly. 'So you'll basically have spent all your pocket money till you're three and a half. All right?'

Minnie looks a bit bewildered. But then, I expect I looked a bit bewildered when I took out my first overdraft. It goes with the territory.

'All sorted.' I beam at the assistant and hand over my Visa card. 'We'll take both ponies, thank you. You see, darling?' I add to Minnie. 'The lesson we've learned today is: never give up on something you really want. However impossible things seem, there's always a way.'

I can't help feeling proud of myself, imparting this nugget of wisdom. *That's* what parenting's all about. Teaching your child the ways of the world.

'You know, I once found the most amazing opportunity,' I add as I punch in my PIN. 'It was a pair of Dolce & Gabbana boots at 90 per cent off! Only my credit card was up to my limit. But did I give up? No! Of course I didn't!'

Minnie is listening as avidly as though I'm recounting The Three Bears.

'I went round my flat, and searched in all my pockets and bags, and I collected up all my little coins . . . and guess what?' I pause for effect. 'I had enough money! I could get the boots! Hooray!'

Minnie claps her hands, and to my delight, the toddler boys start cheering raucously.

‘Do you want to hear another story?’ I beam at them. ‘Do you want to hear about the sample sale in Milan? I was walking along the street one day, when I saw this *mysterious sign*.’ I open my eyes wide. ‘And what do you think it said?’

‘*Ridiculous*.’ The pebble-eyed woman turns her buggy with an abrupt gesture. ‘Come on, it’s time to go home.’

‘Story!’ wails one of the boys.

‘We’re not hearing the story,’ she snaps. ‘You’re insane,’ she adds over her shoulder as she strides off. ‘No wonder your child’s so spoiled. What are those little shoes of hers then, Gucci?’

Spoiled?

Blood zings to my face and I stare at her in speechless shock. Where did *that* come from? Minnie is not spoiled!

And Gucci don’t even *make* shoes like that.

‘She’s not spoiled!’ I manage at last.

But the woman has already disappeared behind the Postman Pat display. Well, I’m certainly not going to run after her and yell, ‘At least my child doesn’t just loll in her buggy sucking her thumb all day, and by the way, have you ever thought about wiping your children’s noses?’

Because that wouldn’t be a good example to Minnie.

‘Come on, Minnie.’ I try to compose myself. ‘Let’s go and see Father Christmas. Then we’ll feel better.’