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The Sweetest Taboo

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Extract

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Chapter One

I can tell you exactly when I fell in love. The exact place. The exact minute. The London Book Fair. Here. *Now.* Let me quickly check my watch so that I will remember it for ever – 3.45 p.m. I have no idea who he is – yet – nor that he's about to turn my life upside down, but already I'm bitten, smitten. He looks at me again and smiles, and my insides flood with a tingling warmth that I haven't felt for a very long time. I also have pins and needles in my feet, but that's more to do with uncomfortable shoes and the first glimmer of a bunion than Cupid's deadly aim.

'We need someone gorgeous,' he tells me, and I realise that I'm staring.

He has an American accent that I can't place. East Coast, West Coast – I'm hopeless, they all sound the same to me. Drawly and sexy. And they all make me go weak at the knees. I adore American men. At sixth-form college my sociology teacher was from Charleston and I couldn't wait for each week's lesson to roll round. I never learned a thing about sociology – to this day I know absolutely nothing about the demographic breakdown of the population of the UK or the moral economy of trade or the effects of a cybersociety on the community . . . but I loved every minute of the classes. He could have been talking about the joys of collecting postage stamps and I, for one, would have remained utterly enthralled.

'It'll take about five minutes. No more,' the All-American man is saying to me now. 'Can you spare the time?'

I want to tell him that if he asked me nicely I could

probably spare the rest of my life, but only manage to stammer out, 'Y-Yes.' If he's called Chuck or Bud or Richie, I am well and truly done for.

Reaching out, he takes my elbow and guides me towards him. I gape round – having failed in the mouth-closing area – looking for approval from Nigel, the manager of the book stand where I'm supposed to be helping out. But he is busy talking numbers to a bookshop owner in a corduroy jacket the colour of a stagnant pond and no one else is the slightest bit interested in what I'm doing.

What I am doing is some temporary work for Bindlatters Books, publishers of a highly dubious range of Technicolor horror books for the 'youff' market that seem to involve more blood than your average abattoir sees in a week and lots of heads being ripped off.

Working for a book publisher may sound interesting – I can just hear myself dropping it into the conversation at dinner parties – but what I'm actually doing is wearing a red polyester uniform and attempting to give out leaflets to people who don't want to take them. They have probably had enough leaflets thrust upon them in the last few days to last a lifetime – although they may not have had ones like ours that are adorned with severed heads.

'Publisher?' my American asks as he eases me through a crush of people.

I guess it's a reasonable assumption to make at a book fair. Would that I could claim such a lofty position. I could pretend, but what would that achieve? But maybe I don't need to admit that my knowledge of books extends to buying the battered copies that have done the rounds of charity shops to fill my long and lonely nights. I am an aficionado of dog-eared Danielle Steel. 'No.' How can I make this sound riveting? I have no idea. I'm not that inventive – at least not at short notice. 'I'm Chief Leaflet Giver-Outer.'

He tries to look impressed as if I've just told him I'm Chancellor of the Exchequer.

'It's a temporary position.' Oh dear. I sound dreadfully bitter.

The London Book Fair is held in Olympia and it takes me forever to get here every morning – as I live in Battersea on the wrong side of the river. But it's only for a week. I have to keep reminding myself of that fact. However, what happens at the end of the week could well be worse. A big fat nothing is currently looming large on the horizon of my life.

I glance at my inadequate official badge. It doesn't bear my name – Sadie Nelson – or any of the other details that single me out from A.N. Other. Just the name of my stand. I guess the people who generally perform this thankless task don't hang around long enough to warrant having a printed name badge. 'Dogsbody' would have been an appropriate title, but they didn't have a badge that said that either.

'I'm Gil,' this gorgeous American says over his shoulder. 'Gil McGann.'

'Publisher?'

'No.'

'Agent?' There are a lot of those about here this week too. They're the ones who look like they don't go out in the sun very often.

'No.' He gives a dismissive shake of his head and takes a firmer grip of my arm as we thread our way through the oncoming throng. 'I'm a Hollywood film producer.'

Yes, and I'm Halle Berry.

'I've just bought a great book,' he continues. '*The One That Got Away.* A romantic comedy – funny as hell. I beat Bob to it.' He looks at me as if I should be bowled over.

'Bob?'

'Bob Redford.'

'Ah.' That's Robert to mere mortals, I'd like to point out.

'I'm here to do smiley things with the author.'

Oh good. So let me just get this clear: I'm standing here in a red polyester uniform, which as well as making me look like I'm having an afternoon off from Butlins, is designed specifically to fit someone shorter, fatter and forty years older than me, talking to a gorgeous Hollywood film producer about his latest movie acquisition. On the

plus side, I'm having a good hair day. If he doesn't look at me anywhere below my neck he might not realise that I'm wearing leftover stock from when C & A went bust. And despite not asking my name, he told me I was gorgeous. Any minute now my alarm clock is going to go off and I'm not going to be able to decide whether this was a dream or a nightmare. Currently, it could go either way.

We squeeze through the crowd and onto another exhibition stand which is a hundred times bigger and swankier than Bindlatters Books' one. It is hung with huge posters of trendy books, some of which I've even heard of, but haven't read because they haven't hit the Skid Row of the charity shops yet. There is a group of people drinking champagne in the corner and laughing loudly. A stainless-steel table with a smear-free glass top has been arranged at one side and there is a crackle of anticipation in the few people, looking decidedly like fellow minions, who are milling around.

Gil stands next to me, but doesn't let go of my arm. I'm not complaining. I have goose-pimples all over me and yet I'm not the slightest bit cold. In fact, you could probably grill hamburgers on my cheeks.

'I hope you don't think this is too much of an imposition?'

'Not at all.' My hormones are nudging me to do my most winning smile. I can't – my feet are hurting too much from standing in one spot all day in high heels. Now I know why exhibition displays are called 'stands'. My lips stretch tightly across my teeth and from somewhere in the depths of my reserves, I send a tired smile back at him. 'Though you haven't actually told me what you want me to do.'

'Damn,' Gil says. 'Sorry. We need you to pose with Elise Neils.' He gives a nod of his head towards a mass of blonde curls surrounded by smooth, be-suited men. 'Feign adoring fan for some press photos – if you wouldn't mind.'

'Oh.' I suppose it could have been worse. It could have involved me perched on a stand giving out leaflets.

This, apart from my current pleasant interlude, has been

the job from hell. But beggars can't be choosers and I very nearly was a beggar before this rather dubious 'opportunity' with Bindlatters knocked.

I used to work in the City – great job, great flat, great car – until due to economic downturn, world recession, plummeting share prices blah, blah, blah, I found myself severely and swiftly surplus to requirements. First the job went, then the car, then the flat, then the fair-weather friends and, accompanying each, a slice of my self-confidence. I had slogged my guts and my liver out for that company – late nights, short lunch-hours, a social life that revolved around entertaining customers with copious amounts of vodka – and it chopped my heart into little pieces to be told to clear my desk and never again darken the door of Allen-Jones Holdings by someone I had considered a good mate.

I vowed never to work in the City again. Panic set in when I realised no one in the City actually wanted me to anyway. 'Recruitment freeze' was the most common term I heard. 'We'd love to employ someone of your calibre, but . . .' Then I found that recruitment freezes were not confined to my chosen industry alone.

Since then I've scrabbled around with a variety of part-time, poorly paid jobs that have barely provided enough to pay my share of the rent on the slightly scrubby flat in Battersea my lovely, lovely friend Alice has very kindly let me squeeze into with her – even though she knows I'm a credit risk. My savings are dwindling at an alarming rate.

I look back at Gil. And, for once, I don't know what to say to this man. I'm not normally known for my reticence, but all my words suddenly seem to have dried up. Perhaps it's being surrounded by a surfeit of them in all these worthy tomes that's making me feel inadequate.

'Here she is,' Gil lowers his head to mine and whispers close and in a faintly reverent manner right next to my ear. The goose-pimples go into overdrive.

The lucky author, who has had half of Hollywood chasing her – including Bob – is a bit too young and a bit

too gorgeous for her own good and I could scratch her eyes out already. I wonder how far Gil McGann's 'being smiley' extends?

Elise Neils is oh-so hip and oh-so tiny and bears the confident air of someone who is used to being pampered. Sliding behind her special desk as if she's done it a thousand times before, she beams a practised beam at her waiting audience. She looks like a complete cow. I want a job that's glamorous, I think, shortly before I'm manhandled away from Gil by a publicity-type woman with trendy horn-rimmed glasses and am plonked next to Elise Neils in order to look adoring.

'Hi,' she says. Actually, she seems quite nice but I'm already determined that I won't like her. She takes up her pen and poses in a suitably authorish way, whilst I bend over and looking subservient and as if my life would improve 1000 per cent if she would deign to scribble in her book for me. A poster declaring: *THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY!* overshadows us both. We both grin like mad at a bevy of flashing cameras. This may be a regular thing for Elise Neils, but if this is to be my only fifteen minutes of fame, I'm going to make damn sure that I mug up to it!

The cameras go click-click-click as we turn our heads to and fro, inducing wedding photo-style smiles, and by the time we've finished I've decided that I don't want to be a celebrity after all.

'Thanks,' Ms Hot Author says to me and benevolently pats my arm with her oh-so tiny hand. She slides out from behind her table and sashays off in the direction of the champagne followed by a horde of devoted men.

I stand abandoned and look round for Gil. He is waiting there, thumbing through a book – the only male in the vicinity with his tongue still in his mouth. Gratefully, I wander back towards him.

'Thanks,' he says. 'You were wonderful.'

I'm not sure if he's being sincere or pulling my leg, but I grin thankfully anyway.

He nods over towards the scrum for champagne, where our future Booker Prize winner gives him the glad eye, but

he is completely oblivious. 'Shall we join the crush?'

'I'd better get back,' I say with a flash of unbridled loyalty that surprises even me. What am I thinking of? Champagne with a Hollywood producer or giving out leaflets on an exhibition stand for less than a fiver an hour, and I choose the latter? I am clearly sickening for something. Or mad.

'I'll walk you back,' Gil says. 'Give me a moment.' And he strolls to the side of the stand to gather some bits and pieces. It gives me time for a more thorough appraisal. And already I'm regretting my decision to hotfoot it back to Bindlatters Books.

Gil is tall and slender and is wearing a suit that looks like it has been squashed into a suitcase on a transatlantic flight and worn on an exhibition stand for too many days. I don't think he's a natural suit-wearer. He isn't glowing with a typical Hollywood tan either and I thought everyone over there was a slave to the sun. Perhaps he spends too much time inside watching movies – I don't know. It sort of suits him, though; he'd look funny if he was tanned. He's boyish in a craggy way and I'm not certain how old he is, but I would suspect that he's still this side of 'life begins at . . .' He has a cute smile and enough charisma to make sure that most women are giving him a second glance. It's certainly working for me.

Gil comes back bearing a raincoat, because as usual this week it has been raining persistently in London, a folded copy of *The Times* and a hardback copy of *The One That Got Away*. He waves it at me. I daren't tell him that I'll read it in about five years' time when it has done the rounds of several offices, all the sex scenes will bear unsightly, unidentifiable stains and it'll probably have a few crucial pages missing. I hate it when that happens – but then it isn't the most irritating thing about being financially embarrassed. Having a cupboard that contains nothing but Ambrosia Creamed Rice and an out-of-date tin of pilchards is much, much worse. Believe me, I know.

He hands me the copy of *The One That Got Away*. 'For you.'

'Thanks.' I feel a flush of deep gratitude until I see a picture of the lovely, lucky and probably fabulously wealthy Elise Neils on the back.

He takes my arm again and we head back towards what I have lovingly come to know as 'my stand'. There are a thousand questions I should be fitting into the next two minutes and I can't think of any of them. This could be my big chance – for what, I'm not sure. But I do know that I am blowing it, like you wouldn't believe.

'Well,' he says.

Nigel is at the front of the stand giving me what I can only describe as 'a look'.

Gil and I sort of hover, looking and not looking at each other at the same time.

Nigel makes a point of checking his watch.

'My hotel does great afternoon tea,' Gil says suddenly. 'Very quaint. Very English.'

'Nice,' I say because my brilliant, sparkling wit can't come up with anything better.

'I think I'll head that way.'

'Sensible idea.'

'What time do you get off?'

'Me?' There appear to be no film stars or flighty young authors around. He nods. I have several thousand more flyers to get rid of before I'm done. Perhaps I could dump them in a wastepaper bin somewhere. 'About an hour.'

'Come to my hotel, Ms Chief Leaflet Giver-Outer. Join me for afternoon tea.'

'Oh.' I couldn't tell you when I last had afternoon tea. In fact, I don't know if I ever have. Isn't it only tourists and blue-rinsed old ladies that do afternoon tea? 'Okay.'

Gil takes a business card out of a silver holder, scribbles on the back and hands it to me. And it does, indeed, say GIL MCGANN, PRODUCER in big, bold letters. 'It's not far. I hope you can come.'

'I will,' I say before my brain has time to compute this and decide that one of us is barking mad.

'See you later.' And he walks off into the crush of publishers and agents while I stand and contemplate the

fact that I have just agreed to go to the hotel of a man who hasn't even asked my name and, although he could have his pick of flighty, flirty young authors to get 'smiley' with, clearly has a fetish for women in red polyester uniforms. I watch him until he disappears, running my fingers round the sharp edges of his card.

Nigel sidles towards me. 'Leaflets,' he says, handing me another interminable pile.

'Leaflets,' I echo. And the earth rushes up to meet me with 'bump' written all over it.

Chapter Two

Gil flopped onto his bed. His room had cost some extortionate amount of money for what was little more than a broom cupboard. A broom cupboard in the attic. He guessed it was supposed to be cutesy, with original beams and steeply sloping ceilings – and more disconcerting, steeply sloping floors – but he kind of preferred rooms that you could stand up in. He'd end up with a hunch back if he stayed here more than a week – already his neck was developing a painful crick. Moving round invariably meant stubbing your toe on heavy mahogany furniture. There was no gym in the hotel and it had rained so much that jogging was out of the question. Jet lag weighed heavy in his unexercised bones. Next time he would stay at The Hempel and be damned.

Lying down was the easier option and Gil stretched out and enjoyed it briefly. Then, he tensed up again. What was he thinking of? There were a million and one things that he ought to be doing while he was in Town other than hitting on strange women. While he was here it had been his intention to schmooze some up-and-coming British writers. There were very few studios making classy romantic comedies these days, and Gil thought it was about time they had some competition. Tonight had been lined up to do some flesh-pressing. What had happened to his brain that it had been swayed so easily by a hot lady in a dreadful suit? As if his life wasn't complicated enough.

Gil couldn't do relaxing, it was too much of a waste of time. He got up and switched on his laptop. The time difference here was a pain. When he was raring to go,

everyone in LA was still curled up in bed – or out at parties. He tapped in his password. The first message was from Georgina, under the heading of *Urgent*.

Gil groaned to himself. Nothing Georgina ever did was urgent. Not in the real world. He clicked the message open. *Call me!* It said. *Now!*

Gil glanced at his watch. Now would not be a good time to call Georgina. He wasn't even sure she would understand that the rest of the world didn't operate on 'Georgina Time'. She'd probably just broken a nail or something equally earth-shattering.

He clicked through the rest of the messages – mainly moans and groans from the studios regarding his latest projects – and dispatched his replies with professional ease. At least email never slept. Gil ran his hands over his face. A shave was definitely in order. His entire 'casual' wardrobe of one sweater and one pair of jeans was spread out on the back of a chintzy armchair and he wished he had thought to pack more clothes for socialising, but then he hadn't bargained on being blown away by a beautiful blonde. How long had it been since he had felt like this? Certainly not since he'd married Georgina, that's for sure.

The digital display of his bedside alarm blinked lazily at him. Gil worried at his thumbnail. Perhaps he'd better call Georgina. Just in case it was, for once, an emergency. There was always that horrible element of doubt with Gina, that some day she might even follow through with one of her many threats. Looking at the phone, he wondered where she was right now. Maybe he should leave it as long as he could.

Gil headed towards the shower, hoping that more water would come out of it than last time. He needed to freshen up and fast. Try to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. For some ludicrous reason he wanted it to go right with this woman.

He also needed to do something about the situation with Georgina, but that was going to take some diplomatic handling. And he was fully aware that he had been putting it off for far too long.

Chapter Three

Mr Hollywood Movie Tycoon could just want casual sex – I fully appreciate that. And maybe it is easier to impress one of the more lowly administrative staff by saying you're a film producer rather than a flighty young author, who might well yawn and think, Not another one! I have no friends here at the Book Fair to discuss this with and I can't ring Alice as she has a real job and is busy, busy, busy 24/7. I also can't ring her because I know she would tell me that I'm being a total wimp.

I'm glad to be leaving the frantic crush of this conference behind. Only one more day to go. It's great if you're really involved in these things but if you're on the periphery of them, doing sundry unseen tasks to keep the whole thing rolling, then it's a bit of a drag. When I was a whizzy City-type, just a few short months ago, I used to love conferences. They took me all over the world – to Paris, Prague and Preston – although I could take or leave the actual work bit. I know it's not original or even unusual to meet one's lover at a conference. Aren't they always very little to do with work and more to do with leaving responsibility or the bosom of one's stifling familial duties behind and going mad for a while by embarking on a period of anonymous sex in an anonymous hotel room with a stranger from a rival company who you're quite sure you'll never see again? (Until the next conference.) I am, of course, talking about other people – not me. I was always purely an observer of these sexual shenanigans.

This is because I don't understand the concept of casual sex. Why would you want to get your bits and pieces out

for a total stranger? Particularly one with a bigger turnover than you. I am into commitment and love and loyalty in a big way and Mr Gil McGann, film producer, is going to be cruelly disappointed if he thinks English girls are easy. Well, this one anyway. I can't vouch for my friends. They all seem to be able to bonk anything that breathes. Or am I just being fussy? It is a criticism that has been levelled at me in the past. Some of my friends have boyfriends *and* girlfriends. What's that all about? A fashion thing? Sexual greed? I don't understand it at all. Or is it just easier to date someone whose nail varnish you can share?

Anyway, I have more immediate problems. Thankfully, Bindlatters Books have supplied me with a locker so that I won't have to turn up at Gil's hotel sporting the red ensemble – although I realise that this may be the only thing about me that he found highly desirable. Oh dear. My confidence is at a rather low ebb.

I came to work wearing black boot-cut trousers and heeled boots from the days when I could afford to splash out on Russell & Bromley ones. On the downside, I am also wearing a cropped T-shirt bearing an embroidered Betty Boo and the caption *Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend!* Alice brought it back for me from Universal Studios on her summer holiday to California last year – her final extravagance before she became a burdened home-owner. It seems a bit naff wearing a Universal Studios T-shirt to have afternoon tea with a man who might well work there in a serious capacity instead of just paying up to go in the theme park and experience a multitude of different ways of getting wet and sick.

I look in my purse. It contains three pounds and fifty pence and a credit card I keep threatening to cut up. Taking Gil's business card from my polyester pocket, I turn it over in my hand. The Townham Hotel. He's right – it isn't too far from here. My stomach has a shiver of indecision. But, hey, who's in charge here? Me or my digestive system? This is the only excitement I've had in days, weeks, months! It's another thing I can drop casually into dinner-party conversations for years to come. Ha! I may not be

trendy enough to have a girlfriend – or desirable enough to have a boyfriend – but this must earn me at least a few 'cool' points. Better than discussing yet another crappy failed interview at House of Pizza.

I obviously come across as way too desperate. Before my last interview, I swotted up on all the different types of pizza the restaurant served and tried to dazzle them with my stunning array of knowledge by quoting special offers and making reference to the recent television campaign featuring the 'thick and crusty'. The manager was dumbfounded and clearly could not cope with the competition as he promised to let me know that afternoon if I'd got the job, but never did. He probably thought I was a mole from Head Office. He was as thick and crusty as his bloody pizza. Next time, I'm going to stick on some fake acne and snarl a lot – I'd be hired in a flash.

Throwing on an elderly Karen Millen version of an Afghan coat that has seen better days, I shoot out of the conference centre and grab a Tube to South Kensington, squashing in with delegates talking in la-di-dah tones about the kind of authors you see all the time on *Lorraine*. The Tube takes an age to chug anywhere from this part of the Underground, which means that every day we all have to suffer the same smelly, dread-locked busker singing old Simon and Garfunkel hits very badly. Nevertheless, in true British fashion, we all cough up our obligatory fifty pence before we are allowed to shuffle off at South Ken station.

The Townham Hotel is just round the corner from here, but before I head there, I dodge between the rows of speeding traffic and cross the road to a little boutique that does great clothes at knock down – and possibly 'knock off' – prices. When I say boutique, it's more of an upmarket charity shop. This is what I'm reduced to, not only for my books but for all my clothing needs too. I rush in and rummage like a woman possessed through the rows and rows of crushed blouses. Got it! For twenty-two quid I become the proud owner of a black lacy top with bell-bottom sleeves and a neckline that does nothing to hide the fact that I'm a girl. Ha! Down with red polyester!

I apologise to my credit card and give it a grateful kiss before battering it again and rush into a cubicle at the back the size of a broom cupboard and change out of my Betty Boo, which gets stuffed unceremoniously in my handbag. I clip my hair up and decide that I look a bit fab – well, better than in my Butlins Redcoat uniform. I'm not sure that the twenty-two-quid top will survive the rigours of Alice's washing machine but it will do for now. I just wish I had some blusher with me. I positively bloom behind a carefully applied barrier of Raspberry Whisper.