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Sweet

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Pan Macmillan

Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

When I got out of jail with a heroin habit and a fat arse, I really thought that things could only get better. Then I found out that my husband Mark, the minger, had only run off and taken the baby with him! Not to mention my iPod. I mean, I can have another baby - but it took me two years to put my proper soundtrack together.

So I did what I've done since I was thirteen, whenever I needed to think about stuff - lifted a half-bottle of vodka, rolled a giant spliff and took it down to the beach. I was born in Brighton, and I've lived here all my life and sometimes it gets on my tits, but I've never got over the fact that you can sit on the beach and look at the sea all for free; doesn't matter how much money you earn, you get the same view.

I grew up way back from the seafront on the Ravendene Estate, in this totally pants tower block, whereas the rich Londoners who've been taking over this place for the past ten years now all buy themselves a cushy little sea view from their big white houses. But as I said, once you're down here on the beach, all that changes; you're all equal. For once.

After a bit I found a pen in my bag and made a list of things for and against me on the inside of an old Tampax tube.

AGAINST
Fat arse
Heroin habit
No money
Mark and baby gone

FOR
Total goddess from arse up
Heroin habit only sniffing, not shooting, so easily lost
Still only 17
Mark and baby gone

I thought then 'Dyke' and my pen hovered over both lists but in the end I didn't know if that was for or against, so I called it a day. Besides, how did I know I was one? I could've just had a soft spot - - for that posh little cow Kim Lewis. My Kizza. Now swept away by her doting parents to a place where me and my evil ways would never find and corrupt her again, apparently. We'd see about that!

See, the way I look at it, me and Kim could have had one sweet life together, what with my brains and her looks. Or was it the other way around? I can never make my mind up, and I guess that when that happens, when you aren't sure who's got what, that's when you're really cooking. Anyway, plenty more fish under the bridge and all that; it's not like Brighton wasn't heaving with fit girls to perve over and steal off, if it came to that. And as for blokes, well we KNOW that they can't resist a little Sugar. So at the end of the day, it was prob'ly best not to decide yet if I was a dyke or not, but just to keep my options open, as it were.

I was getting well cold sitting on the beach so I trudged back up the shingle and got the bus home to Ravendene. The bus smelt like a dinosaur had squeezed its way in and then pissed for the first time in years. It was a far cry from my glory days with Kimmy, tapping her mum's credit card and getting cabs everywhere!

When I got home there was no sign of my mum or my dead-beat brother Jesus, aka J. J., just the gruesome twosome, my minging little sisters She-Ra and Evil-Lyn, whinging on about something; I shoved them out the way and barged straight into Mum's bedroom where I knew she'd be, sitting on her bed surrounded by all our old baby clothes, bawling her eyes out. I perched on the side of the bed and looked at her sympathetically.

'It's not gonna happen, you know, Ma,' I said.

'Give it time,' she sniffed.

'You're, what are you, 38?'

'I'm 35! I had you when I was 18. I thought it was best to wait - see a bit of life first.

I laughed - hollowly, I hoped. The silly cow wasn't being funny, anyway she didn't mean to be. 'Whatever...don't you think you're clocking on a bit to have another brat?'

'I want to hold a tiny body in my arms just one more time,' she says.

'What d'you want a new brat for? What about those two freaks out there?'

'Oh, they're all grown up now - '

' - they're TEN! - '

' - AND they've got red hair. I've got you and Jesus, with your lovely black hair - I'd like to try for a little blonde, like me.'

'Then shag an albino!' I got up off the bed and slammed out. I don't know, it pissed me off to hear Susie talking about babies as if they were handbags - it got me thinking about Renata. My little Ren. Now resident somewhere out there in the wide blue yonder with her nonce of a father.

Everyone I loved had gone, fucked off, left me. Kim, Mark, Ren. And here I was, stuck in an out-of-season seaside town. As I said, things could only get better. Of course, I could've packed up and gone to London that very night. But think about it. A gorgeous chick like me, penniless, all alone in the big city - I'd be shooting up and kneeling down before you could say 'Pretty Woman With A Crack Habit.'

A job - that was what I had to get. Get a job, get some money together, get the hell out of Dodge - where I would forever be the bad guy/slaggy girl - and find Ren, or myself, or some easy mark I could live off. Go abroad maybe - I could see myself living the good life, chasing the sun. Sitting on a balcony somewhere, feet up, glass in hand, no worries. Sweet.

Funny how things change. A year ago I really thought I was happy. After my mad, bad time with Kim I'd had a MAJOR moment of weakness for tall, dark delicious Mark and somehow we'd ended up married and with Ren to show for it. So there I was all tucked up cosy with hubby and daughter. Then one night me and him had a row about the average life expectancy of an Alsatian dog, and before I knew it I was down Lost Vegas getting off with this well fit guy. A few alcopops later and we're doing it on the beach - then his mate turns up. Well, a girl needs time to prepare for these things, I always think. So I grabbed my empty Mad Dog bottle, halved it and stuck it in. Should of seen the blood. So I panicked, called Kizza, she comes running with her slaggy mum's credit card and before you can say 'Rug-muncher' we're having a right old roll-around in this lush penthouse at the top of this posh London hotel. Sweet, it was. Morning after, coppers at the door, handcuffs on, bye-bye Kim, hello clinker.

And you know, though I'm not advocating breaking a bottle in half and sticking it in some random guy forcing himself on you and being put in the clinker for the best part of year, it was certainly a bit of a wake-up call. It makes you decide whether you're gonna sink or swim - or even worse, tread water in the shallow end all your life. And what I wanted was to make a big splash. Or at least make a living. Or at least live - not just survive.

Well, the way I looked at it, I'd tried being wild - didn't work. Tried settling down - ditto. The thing I hadn't tried was being a sensible single girl - sorry, *woman* - making her way in the world. Sort of like Sex And The City, but without the sex. Or the city, really, no matter what Brighton calls itself. It's just a town - a town that's up itself, with good shops and clubs, but a town all the same.

So, not so much sex in the city as toil in the town, at least till the offer I couldn't refuse came along. But doing what? It's not like I was exactly over-qualified. If only they gave out degrees in shoplifting or shooting pool, I'd be a Bachelor of Kiss-My-Ass! The job situation in Brighton isn't exactly a streets-paved-with-gold scenario either. Bastard seaside towns - either packed with tourists and not an inch on the beach or a drink in a club to be had without waiting an hour, or quiet as the grave and pissing down.

If you're not some up-yourself London gaylord with the world of computers at your fingertips, or else some yummy mummy with a tubby hubby who's got the flashy cashy, it can be pretty hard living down here, despite the candy stripes and the carousels and the big blue to console you. 'London prices, Brighton wages' goes the old saying - tell me about it! Basically, at my end of the barrel - which is the bottom, let's not mess about - you can either do seasonal work - on the pier or in the souvenir shops - or you can do domestic stuff - brats, cleaning, cleaning brats - or you can wait on some fat-arsed snobs in restaurants; not even bars at my age, which might've been O.K considering all the buckshee booze you'd get to pour down your neck. Or perhaps - oh, joy! - I could bury my youth and beauty in a call centre. Jeez, talk about spoiled for choice!

And of course they all paid shit wages. It's messed up, this - you think of a job that's cushy or enjoyable - actor, singer, model, whatever - and they all pay like a fortune. But you think of a job that's really demanding, or crap, and they pay peanuts. What's that all about! - should be the other way round by rights. No wonder girls go on the game.

So it was with a heavy heart that I trudged down to the JobCentre next day. Mind you, I say 'trudged', but it was more like 'sashayed.' 'Shimmied', even! One thing I've learned in this life so far, the less you've got the more front you've got to show - it's all very well for posh girls to grab a crumpled old shawl and just dab a touch of blusher on their mugs and flit out the door without even brushing their hair but I don't feel dressed without a faceful of slap. And of course, That Walk; the Sugar Strut, like four stoned puppies fighting in slo-mo in a partitioned sack - two in front, two behind! It's hard for me to tone down my walk - it's my trademark - but I didn't want to overdo the glamour and piss off the pen-pushers at the JobCentre. So I settled for pale pink pedal-pushers, a shocking-pink bomber jacket and puce wedges. Only two earrings - two in each ear, that is - two shades of eyeshadow and one coat of Marvelash. And for the rest I went 'au naturel', as they say - nude lipgloss rather than lipstick, cheek stain rather than blusher and crimped hair instead of proper straightened. I must've looked like one of those demented milkmaid bints you see

pictures of, prancing around with buckets on a stick across their shoulders, I was that undone-up.

Didn't do no use though - I knew this old dyke didn't like me the minute I set eyes on her; shame, 'cos I could have done with a bit of a hand up from the Muffia. So I start outlining the sort of thing I see myself being suited to - actress, model, whatever you call those sluts who go around dressed like cowboys shooting tequila out of guns. Then SHE comes back with all this stuff I'm SO not feeling; waitress, cleaner, CALL CENTRE! Like, NOT!

'Look,' I said quietly. I figured it was time to play my trump card. 'I might look like a flashy, gorgeous piece of aye-uss - ' - I always pronounce like that, American-like - ' - but I'm, YOU KNOW, one of your lot.'

The old bird looked at me blankly.

'A rug-muncher,' I said helpfully, a bit louder this time. 'I've got my LIQUOR LICENCE! Geddit? I'M A DYKE, LIKE YOU!'

You know, Kizza always said I didn't know how loud I was, and I guess the little know-all was right on this one occasion. Whatever, the room had fallen silent and everyone was looking.

'Miss Sweet,' she says, all uptight like, 'I am a mother of three children and grandmother to four. I am not, and have never been, as you so delicately put it, a dyke. Let alone the other things.'

The silence had stopped now, that was the good news - but the sniggering had started, that was the bad. So that being the case, I thought I might as well be hung for a sheep as a creep, and went for the big laugh.

'Well, lady, if that's the case, why are you wearing prison shoes and a moustache I could hang my thong on?'

She looked at me dead nasty for a moment - and then she smiled. And I knew that smile weren't sweet, not one bit. She reached into her little box of tricks and handed me a pink bit of paper. And that's how I started my tour of Hell.