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Recipes for Cherubs

Babs Horton

Chapter 1

SUMMER 1960

Kizzy Grieve turned over in bed, opened her eyes and winced. One too many port and lemons at the club last night had left her with a thick head. She got out of bed, wandered over to the window and looked out into Ermington Square. In the communal gardens, the nannies were already out with their young charges. Some pushed cumbersome prams and others held the sticky hands of squirming toddlers.

Kizzy shuddered. How she would hate such a tedious job, being stuck all day with mewling babies and crabby toddlers. The trouble with small children was that they looked so cherubic and peachy-skinned but only when they were sleeping – for most of their waking hours they were a pain in the proverbial. A schoolmistress shepherded a crocodile of little girls across the road, and their chattering voices made Kizzy frown and put her hand to her aching head.

Only one more week and her daughter Catrin would be back from her convent school for the summer holiday. The prospect of eight whole weeks with her sourpuss of a daughter was more than she could bear to contemplate. What on earth would they do in London for all that time?

If Catrin were an ordinary sort of child it would probably have been quite fun; they could have gadded about together like sisters, spent hours in the shops trying on clothes and then lunched in the most fashionable places.

She lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. Sometimes she wondered if Catrin were a changeling. Wasn't it the cuckoo or the magpie that laid its eggs in the nests of other un¬suspecting birds? Maybe someone in the private maternity home had deliberately switched babies and she'd got the short straw, Catrin.

Someone out there now would have a delightful, pretty daughter full of the joys of living, when by rights they should have been lumbered with bloody Catrin with her baleful looks and nitpicking, fussy ways. Whatever did she have to be so miserable about? She had a nice home to come back to in the school holidays, a lovely bedroom and a ¬generous allowance. She went to a half-decent school – Kizzy would have

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preferred to send her to Benenden or Heathfield but Catrin's godfather, Arthur Campbell had stipulated that as he was paying the fees she had to be ¬educated and brought up as a Roman Catholic.

Catrin wasn't that bad-looking really, not exactly the face to launch a thousand ships but if she just made the best of herself, used a little powder and lipstick, she'd be present¬able. The trouble was she wasn't interested in make-up, clothes or boys or any of the usual things that normal ¬thirteen-year-olds were interested in. Kizzy had never known a girl with such an inability to have any fun at all. Why if she herself were thirteen again she'd be having the time of her life – and she wouldn't make the same mistakes she'd made the first time round.

It would be better for both of them if Catrin didn't come home, but that bloody Sister Matilde had been most un¬helpful when Kizzy rang to ask if Catrin could spend part of the summer holidays at school. She'd said in that oh-so-sanctimonious voice of hers, 'A little time spent with her mother is well overdue.' Time with her mother! That was quite clearly the last thing Catrin wanted, and she made it pretty damned obvious whenever they were together, with her sulks and flounces. If the truth were told Catrin liked school better than home, loved being among the nuns, and it wouldn't surprise Kizzy if she ended up taking the veil or vows or whatever it was they took. It would suit Catrin down to the ground, the perfect life of fasting and long periods of huffy silence.

Sister Matilde was just being spiteful and interfering. After all, Catrin had stayed at school for an extra week at Easter when Kizzy went to Paris. She knew some of the other girls were staying at school for the summer. For a start the Palfrey twins were because she'd met their mother outside the Army and Navy stores. That stuffy-faced bore had said her that her husband had a new posting to Khartoum and the girls couldn't possibly spend the summer there.

Kizzy stubbed out her cigarette angrily. It really was most unfair. She sat down at the dressing table and felt the tears of frustration rising. She pulled open a drawer, fished around for a handkerchief, found one at the back of the drawer, yanked it out impatiently, and a crumpled photograph fell into her lap.

It had been taken on the front lawn of Shrimp's Hotel at Kilvenny in Wales. There was bossy Aunt Ella staring defiantly out at her with those piercing eyes. Next to her stood dear Aunt Alice smiling sweetly at the camera. Kizzy was next to Aunt Alice; how young she looked in the photograph – and positively ravishing, too, even if she said so herself. It was a pity the photograph was black-and-white because the silk dress she was wearing had been the most glorious shade of poppy red. It had cost an absolute fortune, too, but good old Aunt Alice had insisted on buying it for her for the wedding despite Aunt Ella's protestations about wasting hard-earned money on frippery. It had been a divine dress and she'd loved the scalloped hemline and the delicate embroidery round the neck. Oh, and those sling-back patent shoes she was wearing were gorgeous. She was sure she still had them somewhere but she hadn't seen the dress in years.

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She sighed; if only she could turn the clock back, she would do things so differently and certainly wouldn't ¬lumber herself with a child. There was Gladys Beynon, who used to be the cook at Shrimps Hotel; she used to bake ¬pastries one would cheerfully die for. The afternoon teas at Shrimps Hotel had been wonderful; seed cake and cream horns, scones with clotted cream and raspberry jam. Oh, those were the days, when one could feast on fattening things and never put on an ounce. Kizzy's stomach rumbled at the thought of food; she must take one of her little wonder pills in a moment to suppress her appetite. She was creeping alarmingly close to nine stone and that wouldn't do at all.

She was about to stuff the photograph back into the drawer when something caught her attention. Next to Gladys Beynon there was a shadow on the wall of the house, the shadow of someone standing just out of view. There was the unmistakable outline of a boater hat set at a rakish angle and an outstretched hand holding a cigarette.

She put down the photograph with a trembling hand and sat staring into the mirror, watching the tears welling up in her eyes, her mouth crumpling. Then she shook her head, pulled back her shoulders, wiped her eyes and lit another cigarette. It was no good crying over a shadow in a photograph. She'd been just a silly, gullible girl barely five years older than Catrin was now.

She'd fallen for his charms all right, got herself pregnant and been left stranded.

She went downstairs and gathered up her post, glancing cursorily through a couple of depressing postcards. There was one from Marguerite, who was already settled into her villa on the Costa Brava, and another from Lily, who was having an absolute ball at a house party in Cannes. Damn! All she had to look forward to was a summer with Catrin.

Then as she picked up the last postcard her hand began to shake uncontrollably. The card had a picture of a cherub on the front, a smiling, rosy-cheeked cherub with flashing green eyes, his head tilted to one side, looking up towards the cerulean blue of the heavens. She turned the postcard over but there was nothing except her name and address printed in capital letters on the other side.

She stood up, sat down again with a thud, the adrenalin rushing through her and making her tremble with excitement. She must get a grip on herself and think logically. This must be someone playing a cruel joke. But it couldn't be. No one could know about the cherub and its significance to her; it had been their special thing. How her heart used to flutter whenever a postcard like this had arrived at her boarding school, and everyone had commented that there was never any writing on them. She'd smiled secretively and told them that an eccentric old uncle, who could never be bothered to write a message, sent them to her. She held the postcard to her nose and sniffed. There was a definite smell of onions ...

In the kitchen she threw everything out of the drawer in her haste to find a candle and a box of matches, and with her heart racing she held the wavering flame beneath the postcard. Beads of perspiration grew on her forehead and her head thumped

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painfully. Gradually, as the heat warmed the postcard, faint writing in that once-familiar hand began to appear on the paper: 'Napoli Centrale. 15th Luglio – ¬mezzanotte.'

She closed her eyes and tried to breathe normally.

She'd waited years for a message from him and none had ever come until now.

She turned the postcard over and looked at the postmark. Naples.

She put it down next to the photograph and looked at them both. It was such a coincidence that she should come across the photograph by accident and then moments later to receive the card. It was a sign, an omen.

She began to pace about the room. She was in an absolute quandary. It was imperative that she got out of London and down to Naples by 15 July but that was in five days' time, the day before Catrin was due home from school. She couldn't possibly go gallivanting about Europe with her daughter in tow.

Then she had an idea, a ridiculous one, perhaps, but she was desperate. She'd be pushing her luck after all these years and all the bad feeling that last summer she'd been at Shrimp's but that was an age ago and surely the Aunts couldn't bear a grudge for ever.

After all Shrimp's Hotel was an idyllic place for a child to stay – why, there was plenty of fresh air, exercise and good food. Needs must when the devil drives and all that; it was time to forgive and forget, whether Alice and Ella Grieve wanted to or not.

Even if they didn't want to see Kizzy again they might welcome Catrin with open arms; after all she was a blood relative, a Grieve. Aunt Alice had always had a wonderful way with children, such patience and fortitude. Aunt Ella, on the other hand, could be a bit of a tartar, and not one you could twist around your little finger, but she was all right in her own way.

The Aunts would do Catrin a power of good; they would certainly feed her up a bit, put some flesh on her bones. God knows she needed it. It was one thing being thin but the last time Kizzy had seen Catrin she had looked almost skeletal. She supposed it was all that abstinence the nuns instilled in them. Still, a holiday at Shrimp's would put a bit of colour in those bloodless cheeks and if a miracle occurred it might even put a smile on her face.

It was a perfect idea, an enormous cheek, maybe, but what the heck; a lot of water had passed under the bridge since that last summer at Shrimp's. Aunt Alice must surely have got over it by now and was probably rather relieved that things had turned out as they had. It was definitely time to let bygones be bygones.

She hunted around for her telephone book and riffled through the pages until she found the number. Shrimp's Hotel: Kilvenny 311.

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She took a deep breath and dialled, but there was no reply. She replaced the handset with irritation. Of course it was the start of the holiday season and the Aunts would be run off their feet. Oh, well, tiresome though it was, she would have to write to Aunt Alice and tell her when Catrin would be arriving. And Catrin should be delighted; after all, not many thirteen year olds would get the chance to stay in a top-notch hotel for the whole summer. Shrimp's really was quite something. It was a little on the old-¬fashioned side as far as the furnishings were concerned, but the food was wonderful and there were always so many interesting and sometimes very attractive guests.

It was about time Catrin got to know her only living ¬relatives, and she might even be an asset to the Aunts. It was a perfect solution to Kizzy's problems from her point of view and she had rarely found it necessary to consider the views of anyone else.

She dressed hurriedly, smiling to herself as she did so. Life was strange: one minute one could be in the depths of despair and the next one was positively euphoric.

How unbelievable that she was going to Italy. At last she'd be able to find out what had happened to him, why he'd left her like that. Then they would have the most ¬marvellous reunion; she imagined herself lying on an airbed in a swimming pool, cool drink to hand and nothing to do all day. Absolute bliss.

She picked up the telephone and dialled the number of Catrin's school. She would speak to the headmistress and tell her of the new arrangements for Catrin at the end of term.

Half an hour later Kizzy Grieve shut the front door and crossed the square, walked jauntily along the Edgware Road on her way to the travel agent's to buy a rail ticket to Kilvenny and to arrange her own travel down to Italy. Then she thought she might go shopping and buy a few new summer outfits for Catrin as a little treat. One needed to look the part at Shrimp's.

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