Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend

Jenny Colgan

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Extract

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Part One

Now

Chapter One

Ever since I started working, I've always thought that everyone should get a day off the first time in the year that the sun shines. You know, the morning when you wake up and see blue in the corner of the window and smell spring in the air and your heart leaps. Don't you think everyone should just automatically get the day off to go out and enjoy it?

Obviously people might disagree on when this day actually occurs, and you'd maybe have to have an agreement about what temperature it had to be, and then everyone in Scotland would get really pissed off, and, well – it would probably be a bit difficult to administer, especially if the hospitals all suddenly shut down and things. OK. Maybe it's not the *best* idea I've ever had.

Right, how about everyone gets a 'sunshine' day a year and they choose when they take it, like some people get duvet days? Everyone just knows the day, don't they? You can tell on

the street; it's weird, people smile at each other and stuff. Huh. So we're back to the problem of losing all the hospitals and policemen – and traffic wardens, so I'm not saying it would be an *out and out* disaster.

But, anyway. Today is a lovely day, and I am – we are – taking it off and going to the seaside!

Well, maybe not strictly *taking it off*. There are a few advantages to being a freelance photographer – mostly being able to work in your pyjamas, but on the downside, it does get annoying when people say, 'Hey, Sophie, do you go to work in your pyjamas *every* day?'

Anyway, it means you're always thinking about work, even on an official DAY OFF. But that's OK, because I've figured out a way to combine things. Which is why, right at this moment, I'm jumping up and down on the bed. Persuasive tactics.

'Come on! Come on! Let's go to the beach! And I'll do your pictures there!' He slowly opens one eye. 'Sophie. What on earth are you doing?'

'Look! Look out of the window!' I babble.

'How old are you, six?'

'What do you see that wasn't there before?'

'Uh, they've covered up the graffiti? The feral cats have all died?' So, we don't have the world's nicest view.

'Sunshine! There's sunshine! Let's go and take photos!'

'Can I have breakfast?'

'We could have an ice cream for breakfast!'

He thinks for a minute. 'Yeah, all right.'

*

It's hard not to get a little bit excited, walking against the flow of commuters as we leave for Southend with beach towels. Maybe I should go out with a beach towel all the time; I get as many envious looks as if I am carrying the latest Birkin, and it's all I can do not to bounce up and down on the dusty, mottled train carriage seats as I watch the grey buildings of London fade behind us, and the flat lands of Essex spread out ahead.

Apart from a few dog-walkers, the beach is deserted – and absolutely perfect. The air is a little fresher here, out of the city, but the sky is a soft scuddy blue, and the sun feels warm and life-giving, coming after such a long winter. I want to stretch out and luxuriate in it, like a cat. I turn my back to the sun so I can feel it through my clothes, and close my eyes.

'Ahhhhh,' I say.

He smiles. 'Happy?'

You know, it seems such an innocuous question, but it makes me pause. I look around at the dunes, at the old-fashioned hotels that still line the front, looking dilapidated this early in the season. I watch a dog run after a seagull, the dog clearly barking its head off but too far away to be heard.

Am I happy? It's been such a long time since I could answer this question in any kind of a positive way. It's hard to think about the kind of person I used to be.

I smile. 'Well,' I say, getting out my beloved Leica, 'yes. Although I'd be even happier if you can find somewhere open that sells fish and chips.'

He smiles. 'You are just so high maintenance.'

'But first,' I order, brandishing the camera, 'lots of you looking moody in the middle distance.'

I study him through my lens. He's not traditionally handsome, I suppose. Which suits me just fine, I'm not traditionally pretty. Pale, light skinned. I used to have long blonde hair I parted in the middle like Gwyneth Paltrow, until I met a drippy man at a party with *exactly the same hair*. Not only that, but he then dedicated a song to me on his acoustic guitar, which was mildly exciting until he opened his mouth and sounded like a twenty-four-wasp pile-up. The lyrics were something like 'Oh woman, you ripped my heart into little pieces of shit', which I wasn't very impressed about since he'd only just met me and everything. I cut my hair quite soon after that.

'Look solemn,' I instruct, which is difficult to say to a man who has a small piece of ice cream on his cheek – a leftover from our Magnum breakfast (white chocolate, of course. Dark chocolate is very much an after-dinner Magnum).

He sighs. 'Why?'

'Because you have to look like a great artist eagerly awaiting inspiration for his next masterpiece. I'm taking some shots for your new brochure.'

'Shh! Don't jinx us. Can't I just look like a cheerful artist eagerly awaiting his next cheque?'

'No-oh. That's a bad look.'

'What about a starving artist who doesn't know how he's going to pay the water bill?'

‘Let me see it,’ I instruct. ‘Hmm. No. It’s a bit disappointed-looking.’

‘I was very, very disappointed by our water bill.’

‘Shh! Look out to sea then.’

‘Oh, yes, that’ll be great. Then I’ll look like I’m about to start sculpting those stripy lighthouses you buy at the seaside.’

I put the camera down. ‘There’s money in that! That could work!’

‘No! We’ll pay the water bill. Somehow.’

‘I quite like those lighthouses,’ I muse. Oh, yeah, that’s the other downside to being a freelancer – always being skint.

‘Stop! Stop! Please!’

‘OK!’ I say. ‘Deranged! Passionate! Look just like that!’

‘You do talk some binkety bollocks,’ he complains, but keeps his head still as I shoot frame after frame. With the calm line of the sea behind him, and the sharp lines of his profile, I reckon they should come up rather well in black and white and if this mooted exhibition of his ever comes off, my pics can go in the programme.

Eventually I think I’ve got my shot and we’ve both earned our proper breakfast, so he heads off over the dunes.

I settle down on the sand to wait. OK, it’s not luxurious Mediterranean weather, but that’s kind of nice; there’s a freshness off the sea, just in case you forget for one second you are in England. But apart from the waves, it’s so quiet. I feel like we’re the first people ever to discover

this beach. I rest my chin on my hands and just stare out to sea.

Am I happy? Right here? Right now? Pff, it's a big question, with a big answer.

Chapter Two

When I was eleven, my mum died. It's all right, it wasn't your fault – or *was* it? No, I'm kidding, sorry. It's just people always look so upset. It's now over eighteen years ago, and I still hate having to tell people. They always look really stricken and shocked, and I end up saying, 'It's OK,' and somehow comforting them instead.

Up to then I was pretty normal, or at least I think I was. I was quite a shy girl whose main hobbies were beads, Barbie and playing schools. I suppose I lived in a big house but I honestly didn't notice that at the time. I thought everyone had a maid and their own dressing room. Anyway, as far as *that* goes, I would have traded the dressing room, every Barbie ever made and anything else I owned not to have the memory of the day the head teacher came into the classroom and, in an odd, strangled-sounding voice, asked if she could see me in her office.

Here is how I try to remember her. One night, I must have

been around seven, they were on their way out – they went out a lot, my mother loved balls and dancing and my father liked to indulge her. She was wearing my favourite dress – she had so many, but most she only wore once or twice. This one came out every year. It was a fuchsia-coloured silk (hey, it was the eighties) which she wore with her blonde hair curled up and a flower in it. My father would put the flower in. He would pretend it was a matter of utmost importance that only he could possibly get right, and would treat it like a serious operation, with lots of Kirby grips and hairspray. He would bend towards her, their profiles nearly touching, and carefully, fussily, arrange the orchid in her hair. Then they'd both turn to me, my mother's eyes sparkling with excitement as she bent down.

'Now,' my father would say. 'Sophia, you must decide. Is your mother acceptable to be seen in decent society?'

And I knew somehow that I had to keep my face very serious as if I was doing a proper inspection. My mother showed me her hair all over, and I'd check it carefully and say, 'Hmm . . .'

And Mummy would say, 'Please! Please tell me, Sophia, have I done enough to pass your inspection?'

And Daddy'd say, 'Yes, if we fail we will miss the party, and you know how your mother hates to miss parties!'

And my mother would make a sad face. After I'd waited as long as I could, I'd finally say, 'Weelll . . . I suppose you pass.'

'Hurrah!' And my mother'd kiss me, leaving sticky fuchsia lipstick on my cheek. My father made out that he was incredibly relieved and they'd promise to bring me back the best cakes from the party. Then my father would lend me his precious Leica and I would take their photograph.

We'd always had these little rituals; the fuchsia dress is the one I remember the most. Later in life I thought how odd it was for them to go to every single party with a little bag and steal the *petits fours*. But they did, because they loved me, and because we were a family, and I think that's when I first picked up my fondness for eating sweet things for breakfast.

After she went, of course, we fell apart. Even though I was eleven, it's a blur in my head. I hadn't realised how well and gently my mother had run the household until she left. Without Esperanza, who helped us, we'd have been eating cold beans out of a can within the week.

My parents' many friends were very sweet, of course, and crowded round and brought casseroles and asked me over to play with their children all the time. Except, weirdly, I always felt that I had to be on my super-best behaviour, otherwise the mothers invariably started to cry, and I hated upsetting everyone.

And after a bit of time had passed, even if I felt a little better and wanted to smile or join in with games, I could see the other girls and their mothers looking at me, as if to say, 'How can that girl play when her mum has died?' And that would make me feel guilty and sad all over again.

Daddy coped with it all by throwing himself into his work. He ran some sort of personal investment blah blah fund blah thing. He'd tried to explain, but I'd never really listened. He hurled himself at it, in fact, and very successfully too, which meant he was always away from home. He felt I needed more structure to my life, and the best opportunities, so he made the decision to send me away to boarding school.

Daddy really did think it was the best way, even though he cried so much saying goodbye to me I ended up patting *him* on the back. The maddest thing was that Kendalls was only about half a mile from where we lived in Chelsea. He didn't want to send me away, he just wanted me to be looked after in a safe environment, somewhere that didn't have memories of my mother spilling out from every face; from every dress, and gate and lamp post.

I did have a romantic idea about boarding school that I personally blame on Malory Towers, and my mother's favourite, *What Katy Did at School*. I wasn't averse to the idea at all. Whilst I wasn't exactly expecting anything to be fun, I thought midnight feasts, pony rides, and playing pranks on the teachers might be quite interesting. Plus, nobody had a mother while they were there, so I'd fit in.

Hmm. Boarding schools in books aren't exactly like real boarding schools. I should have known that, shouldn't I? Instead of lots of fun girls, there were lots of really pretty, quite fierce and frankly intimidating girls.

At first I was quite interesting – my tragic story attracted a lot of attention. As this flurry of interest died down, however, and it became apparent that I didn't yet have an expense account at Harvey Nics, I was left more and more on my own. Being a quiet girl had never mattered before as my parents were always there to listen to me, and I never felt lonely or out of place.

Here, however, I was as lonely and awkward as could be. Until the day I caught Carena Sutherland giving her hamster a pedicure. Did you know hamsters are allergic to nail polish? Me

neither. I was just looking for a cupboard to hide in while I ate my lunch by myself. I had absolutely nothing to contribute to the other girl's conversations about diets, boys on television shows I hadn't seen, or music I hadn't listened to. If I'd been less bruised and awkward I'd perhaps have found it easier to meet people I clicked with. But I wasn't, and I didn't.

'*Shit!*' Carena was saying, looking at the clearly dead animal lying on its side.

'What's that?' I asked timidly.

'It's a very, very small orang-utan, what does it look like?' she scoffed, then turned towards me. I shrank backwards. Carena was by far the prettiest, most popular and most frightening girl in our class. Her parents worked away all the time and she said her nanny was going to let her go to nightclubs when she was thirteen. We kind of believed her.

'Don't tell anyone about this, right?' she said in a threatening voice. So I didn't, and I could see her eyeing me approvingly when Mr Carstairs spent twenty minutes grilling us all. I kept my mouth shut.

Two months later, she spoke to me again. My dad had just bought himself a Lamborghini. I have no idea what was going through his head. He must have just woken up one day and thought, Well, I've lost the love of my life – perhaps a big shiny red car will do. Or someone at work recommended it. Certainly he let Brad, his assistant at the time, go and pick it up for him and, on a whim, sent him to pick me up too.

The car made an incredibly loud roar coming up the street. It was bright red and looked absurdly flashy. All the girls came to look at it and then out stepped Brad. He was tall, handsome,

American, gay and extremely sweet to me. Dressed in a stripy shirt, hair perfectly gelled back and sporting big white teeth, he looked like the epitome of our twelve-year-old pin-ups.

'Hey, pretty lady,' he said. 'Want to come for a ride?'

In fact, he just dropped me at my dad's office and I waited an hour for my dad to get out of his meeting, then Daddy and I drove up the King's Road in near silence. Finally, at the top, Daddy turned to me.

'This is stupid, isn't it?' he said.

'Well . . .' I said.

'I thought buying this car would make me feel better.'

'Does it?'

'She'd have hated it, wouldn't she?'

'It's really, really tacky, Dad.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'I should have guessed when Brad liked it so much. Want to go and eat pizza?'

'OK.'

I don't remember ever seeing that car again. It was the first time I realised that my family was quite rich.

And the next day, Carena casually strode past me at break time, pretended to look surprised to see me, then said, 'Oh, Sophie, do you want to go to my house for lunch?'

Just like that. It was comparable, later, to the first time I was ever asked out by a boy (Marcus. Father farmed half of Shropshire. More comfortable talking to animals than girls. His kisses were like being licked by a large horse).

And from then on, we were friends, even when she found out Brad wasn't actually my extremely glamorous and somewhat paedophiliac boyfriend, but an employee of my dad's. She

enjoyed my obvious admiration and I couldn't help it – she was dazzling. So sure of herself. My world was confusing and I wasn't sure of the rules, but Carena seemed to waltz through on an unstoppable cloud of self-belief that she would get everything she wanted and everything would stop for her. And it usually did.

We all smoked our first fags at Carena's; cadged our first vodka. Her other best friend was Philly, a scholarship girl, and Philly and I vied to be Carena's closest lieutenants. It was great not having to worry about what I was doing, because Carena always did. I started to adopt her 'don't care' attitude, her slightly supercilious look at the world. Perhaps I got a little mouthier, a little harder. I like to think I was too timid to have tipped over the edge into really bad behaviour – but then Gail happened.

One Saturday night, Carena was staying with me – I was thirteen – and Daddy came home from a business trip to Prague. He'd been doing a lot of flying recently. He came in late, and I could hear from upstairs that he had someone with him. They were laughing. My dad used to laugh all the time. Lately, not so much.

'Who's that?' asked Carena, putting on lipgloss in the large gilt mirror that hung next to the staircase and making a sexy face. We were making sexy faces quite a lot at the moment. They were probably not sexy so much as freakish, and scared a lot of our teachers.

'I don't know,' I said. My dad rarely brought anyone home except for his lawyer, Uncle Leonard (I didn't call him uncle any more, not since Carena had heard me and made fun of me).

The large door swung open.

'Sophia? Darling?' My dad's voice floated up the stairs. 'Are you home?'

I made a humphy noise of assent which I'd noticed Carena doing a lot recently.

Daddy came into the hall. He looked tired and he was putting on weight. But he had on a broad smile, and his eyes had crinkled up at the corners.

'Sophie, I'd like you to meet –' and almost with a flourish, he announced – 'Gail.'

Gail stepped forward with an anxious smile on her face. She was pretty and blonde, with an upturned nose and cute rabbity smile that at the moment looked extremely nervous.

'Sophie!' she said, her voice slightly too bright. 'I recognise you from your photos!'

I was so taken aback I could barely speak. It was totally obvious what was going on. He'd gone and got a girlfriend without telling me! I was genuinely knocked sideways. Carena made an gasping noise. I stared at her. My father was still looking up at me hopefully. On one side was Carena. Downstairs was my dad. And standing right in front of me was the biggest affront I could imagine. And she had lipstick on her teeth.

'Hello . . . Gail,' I said simply, without smiling or getting up. Gail's smile faltered immediately. And suddenly, this made me incredibly cross; what was she expecting, that I run down the stairs and give her a huge hug and beg her to be my new mummy?

My dad took Gail's elbow.

'Gross!' said Carena. I glanced at her, completely in shock. 'Come on,' she said. 'Let's go.'

For a moment I was torn. Then I turned and followed her.

'Who was *that*?' said Carina loudly as we reached my bedroom. The worst thing was having to admit that I didn't even know.

My dad called me in later that evening, after Gail had gone home.

'I'm sorry about that,' he said. 'It was spur of the moment. We were passing, and I thought . . .'

I stared at him. Thought what? That I'd like to meet . . . well, it had just never occurred to me that dad would find someone else. It had been only two years. He had me!

Daddy put out his arms. 'She's a lovely girl, Sophia. You want me to be happy, don't you?'

Of course I did, and I was too scared to tell him how I felt in case I upset him. But inside I was as furious and mixed up and jealous as I'd ever been in my entire life. Someone had taken my mum, but no one was having my dad!

Soon, my life was a weekly soap opera for my schoolmates as Gail tried her best to be friends with me. The ruder I was to Gail, the more popular I got at school. *EastEnders* had nothing on me.

She did try, she really did. There were 'family' outings, treats and special trips. I sulked through them all like only a thirteen-year-old girl can. If they had made passive-aggressive stropping about an Olympic sport, I'd have been a shoo-in, with

a good shot at heavy sighing, door-banging and the sour-faced triple jump.

So, of course, the inevitable happened.

It was one Friday afternoon, I'd gone home after school to pick up some clothes and money *en route* to spending the weekend at Carena's. I loved my dad's study. It always smelled differently to the rest of the house – my mother had never spent any time in there, so it didn't have the faint scent of her perfume (Miss Dior) which permeated the rest of the house and which I still can't smell without feeling that someone's just given me a swift punch to the back of the neck.

'Sweetheart, could you come in and have a word?' Dad said. I looked round, hoping he hadn't had my latest report. My huge excuse for bad marks was starting to look less impressive this far down the line.

He looked nervous. Well, good. Nervous was better than annoyed with me.

'Sophia . . .' He looked at his hands. 'Look, I was thinking . . . I was thinking of asking Gail to marry me.'

Oh God. All my worst nightmares were coming true. I didn't even have the presence of mind to strop out, make a fuss or yell. I stood there, frozen, as my eyes filled with tears.

'Sophia, it's OK!' He reached out his arms as if to give me a cuddle, but I was stuck to the spot. Then he sighed.

'This isn't about your inheritance, is it?' he said gently. 'You know I'll always look after you.'

That thought had never even crossed my mind. Everyone at school had money. The topic just never came up.

I was petrified that I would lose my father. Oh, even for a

thirteen-year-old, I was self-obsessed. I just stood in that study and let the tears drip down my face, so he could see them.

And now, here I am on a beach, so much later, thinking, am I happy?

Anyway, let me just say that I definitely, definitely, *definitely* got my comeuppance. Let me tell you exactly what happened.