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Opening Extract from...

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Sunday night

The Thames at night. Beautiful, as the reflections of the city's lights dance and twinkle on the black waters. The Millennium Wheel, lit up like a fairground. Its lights pick out a small, slight figure standing perilously on the parapet of Westminster Bridge. A girl of about eighteen. She looks so frail, as if a puff of wind would blow her away.

Suddenly there is the screech of a car skidding to a halt near her. Car doors open and there is the sound of running feet. The girl on the parapet turns, alarm in her eyes. Three girls stand there, holding themselves back from rushing to the balancing girl, but it is obvious from their body language that they want to. That they *need* to.

'Come on down, Shannon,' says one. 'Don't do anything stupid.'

The girl on the bridge, Shannon, recovers herself. She looks at the three girls. She trusted them, and now . . .

The girl who'd spoken, Kerrys, pulls something from her

pocket and points it at Shannon. It is a gun, the metal reflected in the lights.

‘I said come on down, girl!’ snaps Kerrys. ‘With the stones!’

‘We’ve got what you want,’ says a shorter girl wearing a gaudy yellow and orange uniform, as calmly as she can. Joanne. But right at this moment Joanne’s not feeling calm. Inside her chest her heart is beating wildly. From her pocket she takes an envelope and holds it up for Shannon to see. ‘Now give us what we want.’

Shannon hesitates, then she reaches into her own pocket and takes out a small black bag. She knows what’s in there, but she pulls it open to take another look. It’s filled with diamonds. Even this distance from the lights, they glint and sparkle. They must be worth hundreds of thousands of pounds. No, millions.

But so what? What’s the point? There isn’t one. Life is . . . pointless.

Shannon puts the diamonds back in her pocket and turns away from the other three girls. Below her are the waters of the Thames. She steps forward.

SHANNON

1

Friday

Shannon sat at the table in the Mr Cappuccino Cafe and looked at the patterns in spilled sugar on the plastic table top. Saw them spiral. It would make a good design for one of her pictures. Maybe one of her street murals. Spirals were good, a spray can going round and round, paint on brick.

She sipped at her coffee and her eyes went to the clock. 3 p.m. She wondered where the other girls were. She wondered who'd be first. Usually it was Jo, then Kerrys, and Cass last. Jo was always on time, punctual. Shannon guessed it came from working at the convenience store. Cass never seemed to bother about time. That must come from being rich. The rich never seemed to have to worry about time. Time was for other people. Ordinary people.

As Shannon thought about the girls – apparently so different from each other – she realised how hard it must seem for anyone outside the gang to understand how close they were.

Cassandra, tall, willowy, rich, with her own expensive upmarket apartment, who seemed almost aloof to most people. Yet never to the other girls. With her family's money Cass could have chosen to go to any private school, but she had opted to stay at the state school where her friends were.

Shannon wondered whether that was because Cass's parents had come into their money late, after Cass had been at secondary school with Shannon, Kerrys and Jo for a year. A lottery win, invested in business, and suddenly Mr and Mrs Phillips were rich. Seriously rich. They could buy their daughter anything she wanted, and that included the very best education. But by then Cass, Kerrys, Shannon and Jo had become really tight, and Cass refused to budge. If her three friends couldn't go to these top-of-the-range schools, then neither would she. If I have my friends and a piano, I don't need anything else, Cass had said.

Yes, the piano. The one part of Cass that went where her friends couldn't follow. Shannon had watched Cass at the piano – at school, at her home – and seen how the Cass she knew disappeared and merged with the keyboard, with the whole instrument. Cass *became* the instrument, the sounds pouring out of them both: tender, beautiful, strident, her hands caressing or pounding the keys as she poured herself into the music, lost to the world outside.

Shannon knew how Cass felt at times like that. It was the same for her with her art, her painting. Day-to-day life for Shannon seemed grey, dead and lifeless, especially since . . . since what had *happened*. The reason she'd dropped out of Sixth Form. The *real* reason, that no one knew. OK, her parents knew, but not her friends. She couldn't tell them. Ever.

At the thought of it, once again tears pricked at the back of her eyes. The pain. The pain that would never go away.

She bit at her lip and fought to stop the tears from coming out. Keep the pain away. Keep the *thought* away. Lose herself in her painting. Her street graffiti. Her sketch pad. Her paintings on the walls. But she couldn't keep *it* out. It was always there, coming into her art more and more; it wouldn't be denied.

Stop thinking about it, she told herself harshly. Think of your friends. That's why we're meeting today. Because we're friends. We look after one another.

Like Kerrys, the toughest, feistiest person Shannon had ever known. Shannon had been best friends with Kerrys since they were in the same class at primary school. That first day at school the teacher had sat them together at the same table because everyone had been sorted out alphabetically. So Kerrys Pinto sat next to Shannon Richards. Shannon mused how lucky it had been that the teacher had thought that Kerrys's name 'Jauo' had been

her middle name. Kerrys Jauo Pinto. Someone had missed off the hyphen in Jauo-Pinto. If it hadn't been for that simple mistake, Kerrys could have been sitting next to someone whose name began with J or K; and Shannon would have found herself with someone very different. Like that horrible kid Mark Stevens. Or Anya Torstein.

The thought of Kerrys being her friend gave Shannon a feeling of comfort. Having someone like Kerrys on your side meant you were protected. Kerrys had always been the tough one in class at primary school, tougher than any of the boys. It was as if Kerrys was always spoiling for a fight. Shannon guessed that was because of Manuel, Kerrys's older brother. Or half-brother. He was always digging at her, calling her 'half-breed' because she was black and the rest of the family were . . . well . . . white Brazilian.

Not that Manuel was racist. All the friends he hung around with were either black or mixed race. No, it was just there was an edge towards Kerrys from Manuel. There always had been, right from those days in primary school. And that had given Kerrys an edge towards everyone else, like she was always ready to defend herself: to attack before they attacked her.

So different from Jo, thought Shannon. Jo, been in England six years but still had that American accent. Shannon and Kerrys had met up with Jo at secondary school when she hadn't been long in England. The family had come

over because of work. They'd been in England two years when Jo's dad had been killed, run down by a bus. A tragic accident, the coroner had said. Shannon tried to imagine what it would be like if that had happened to her dad, and just the thought of it made her feel sick inside. It was bad enough to think of losing her dad now she was eighteen. To have lost him when she was just fourteen, like Jo, was . . . It was unthinkable. A nightmare. But Jo seemed to have this amazing ability to bounce back. Whatever you threw at her, she might recoil, but then she came up again, smiling. Boys, heartache, bad results at school, Jo bounced back.

Shannon looked up from the table towards the door of the cafe, and saw Kerrys walk in and sashay towards her. Yes, *sashay*. That was the word. Kerrys didn't just walk, she *larged* wherever she went, and people got out of her way, if they were sensible.

Confidence, that's what it was. Kerrys had it. Cassandra certainly had it. Even Jo had it, though not to the same extent.

What's wrong with me? thought Shannon miserably. Why am I the one no one notices?

Kerrys threw herself down in the seat opposite Shannon. Her skirt was so short the words 'Eat Me' on her pants blared out to the world.

'Hey, stranger.' Kerrys grinned.

'Nice pants,' commented Shannon.

Kerrys winked.

‘It pays to advertise.’

‘How are the driving lessons?’ asked Shannon.

The smile vanished from Kerrys’s face.

‘They’d be better if the instructor stopped trying it on with me. So, when you gonna come back to school?’

Shannon shrugged.

‘Maybe Monday?’

Before she could enlarge on this, a call of ‘Ladies!’ made her turn. Cassandra and Jo were bearing down on them, Cassandra’s arms open wide in greeting, her clothes blaring top-of-the-range designer labels.

She is so *rich*, thought Shannon enviously, and immediately hated herself for thinking it. It wasn’t Cassandra’s fault that her parents were loaded. It was the way it was. Life was unfair.

‘So when are you coming back?’ asked Cassandra.

‘I just asked her that,’ said Kerrys.

‘Class isn’t the same without you!’ insisted Cassandra.

Shannon hesitated. She knew that Cassandra meant every word. That’s the way it was with Cass. What you saw was what you got. But the luvvie attitude, the whole ‘kissy kissy’ thing . . .

Shannon half turned, and as she did she saw Dillon walk into the cafe and her heart gave a little jump. He looked so cool. So handsome. If only he’d *notice* her.

Kerrys saw the rapt expression on Shannon's face, turned to see what had caused it and saw Dillon.

'Oi!' she called, gesturing at him.

Dillon half turned at the shout, and smiled at the girls. He looked like he was about to come over, but then his phone rang. He answered it, listened intently and then was gone, out of the cafe without even a backward glance.

Shannon strained to see where he went, and saw Dillon meet up with a gang of boys. A few words were exchanged, and then they disappeared from her view, along the street. She slumped back into the seat.

'He didn't even look at me!' she said miserably.

'Yes, he did!' said Jo.

'No, he didn't,' said Shannon. 'He just looked at the three of you.'

The other girls exchanged looks and raised eyebrows.

'He looked at all of us!' Jo told her firmly.

Shannon shook her head.

'It was just you three,' she said, equally firmly.

Kerrys laughed.

'He's outa luck with me.' She grinned.

'And I've got a man,' said Cassandra proudly.

Shannon wasn't mollified.

'Well, Jo's in luck then,' she said with a sniff.

'Oh, come on!' said Jo. 'I'm not going to steal your boy!'

Keen to change the subject away from Shannon's gloom, she turned to Cassandra.

'So, you Skyped your Brett yet?'

Cassandra shook her head.

'Brett doesn't have Skype.'

Jo grinned.

'Do your parents actually know they're *paying* for their baby girl to snare her first catch in the penis flytrap? Or, in layman's terms, get fucked.'

Cassandra shook her head haughtily.

'Officially I am going to New York to audition. Sir Jago Larofsky is only going to take on three students when he moves to Europe. I'm going to make sure I'm one of them.'

Jo chuckled.

'And get laid at the same time by Mr Cool and Handsome.'

Suddenly Kerrys ducked down at lightning speed, and as she came up the other girls were shocked to see she had a firm hold of the wrist of a guy in his forties. And in the guy's hand was Cassandra's Marc Jacobs bag.

Kerrys scowled at the startled expression on the thief's face.

'What the fuck you thinking, blud?' she demanded. 'You want ladies' bags, yeah?'

In one swift movement, Kerrys scooped up Shannon's art bag and smashed it into the thief's face. Then she

dropped it, kned him in the crotch, and as he doubled over she swung her fist and connected with him hard, full in the face.

The thief stumbled back, dazed, dropping Cassandra's bag on the floor, blood pouring from his nose. Kerrys stepped forward, over the strewn contents of both handbags, and punched the thief in the face again. He dropped to the floor and Kerrys pushed one of her trainers on to his face.

Shannon, Cassandra and Jo began to scoop up the fallen possessions — tampons, matches, lipsticks, girly stuff — from the bags and push them back in.

In her haste to clear up the mess, Jo didn't notice that an envelope she'd picked up from the floor had 'Shannon' written on it. She passed the envelope to Cassandra, who stuffed it into her bag without even looking at it.

Meanwhile Kerrys looked down with scorn at the thief trapped beneath the sole of her trainer.

'You looking up my skirt?' she demanded.

Frantically the thief tried to move his face away from looking up at Kerrys's pants, but her foot was on his head too firmly. Kerrys produced a cable tie from one of her pockets.

'Guess I'm gonna have to cable-tie you,' she grunted.

Cassandra looked on with awe as Kerrys bent down and expertly cable-tied the man's wrists together.

‘Why do you carry cable ties?’ she asked, bewildered.

‘Just in case.’ Kerrys shrugged.

She handed some of the ties to Cass.

‘Here. You never know when they’ll come in useful.’

A large man wearing a kilt had wandered over.

‘They’ve called the police,’ he informed them. He looked down at the thief in disgust. ‘Want me to take over till they get here?’

Kerrys nodded.

‘Cheers,’ she said, stepping back. To the thief she snapped, ‘When they’re arresting you, remember one thing: girls rule, bitch.’

With that the four girls headed for the street. Behind them the big burly Scot stood over the tied-up and bleeding thief.

‘Let’s see how you like looking up my skirt,’ he growled.