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Opening Extract from...

Sin Tropez

Written by Aita Ighodaro

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Chapter 1

RE: St Tropez!

*Please email me all your details and a picture if possible
as we are starting to arrange our summer in the sun.*

*Let me know what passport you have and if you need a
visa for France. Yeah, yeah, yeah, summer is on its way!*

Tara Wittstanley read the message aloud to her best friend, Abena Ankrah.

‘Ah donnt belive eet!’ Abena thundered with a wildly exaggerated Ghanaian accent – a departure from what was actually her cut-glass English one, which always cracked Tara up. ‘A picture?’

‘Sweetheart,’ Tara replied, ‘this *is* Reza we’re talking about. Absolutely nothing would surprise me. I’m just astounded his assistant hasn’t asked for our cup sizes and sexual preferences too. This, darling, is what you’d call a mind-bogglingly rich, spoilt and depraved little man.’ But her eyes were flashing fire and her heart was beating hard and fast.

Tara had been introduced to Reza months earlier through the gorgeous Domenico, who she’d met in Milan during fashion week.

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In order to get the time off university so close to her final examinations, she'd told her old tutor at Oxford that she was having 'Women's Problems'. Those two simple words were enough to put terror into his bespectacled eyes and, rather than have to delve any deeper into the nature of said 'Problems', he advised her to take a week off her studies with immediate effect. And so Tara spent her entire student loan that term on a trip to Milan for a week of fashion parties and hobnobbing with editors, designers, models and photographers. She went mainly because she felt like it, but also with a vague secondary interest in securing contacts for a job in fashion after she graduated. That hadn't worked, but she *had* met Domenico.

Domenico was well dressed, in that flamboyant way she pretended to hate, incredibly good looking and, at just twenty-seven, was already running an unusually successful men's clothing retail company. The 'Women's Problems' quickly developed into a full-on 'Woman's Crisis' and the pair embarked on a passionate but doomed fling. They spent Tara's second week off uni at Domenico's spanking new penthouse on the seafront in Monte Carlo, where Tara fell completely, unashamedly and far too quickly for everything she'd always felt was so wrong with the Riviera. She was seduced by the way he deftly handled his red Lamborghini while stroking her thigh, which glistened in the Mediterranean heat. She was seduced by the feel of the wind blowing through her long, sun-bleached hair and floaty cotton dress (worn without undies) as she thought to herself how glamorous they must look, speeding down the empty road in their open-topped love machine.

On their first evening in Monaco he took her to Jimmy's nightclub, where even a glass of water cost more than her budget airline

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flight to Milan. They danced all night on tables outside, relishing the fresh sea air, the starlit sky and the music that blared so cockily loudly. Like they owned the whole world and didn't care who heard. They had no plan whatsoever, only to dance and dance and dance. With the wild, frenzied movements of their long limbs they kept knocking over full bottles of expensive champagne. But it didn't matter because there was always more. There, dancing on a table under the stars with this man, nothing mattered. She was far away from her parents and Willowborough Hall, with all its history and unspoken demands and expectations, far from the relentless social whirl of London and far, far away from her dreary Oxford don. She knew it was love.

Domenico declared he couldn't live without her, so they rushed back to his apartment and in a state of post-coital and drunken euphoria logged on to the internet where Domenico booked a flight to London for the first weekend after Tara's finals and then every weekend for the rest of the summer. He wanted to book in every weekend for the rest of his life but Tara stopped him, saying she'd come and visit him in Italy and Monte Carlo too.

On her flight home she was called aside by immigration officers and questioned as to why her passport had been defaced with hearts and kisses and possibly, therefore, invalidated. She had talked her way out of that one, luckily – if the situation had escalated she'd have had trouble convincing everyone at Oxford that a trip to Monaco was the best cure for Women's Problems. All awkward questions deflected, she sent word to Domenico that she was safely back home. He kept his promise and flew to London weeks later, and that's when she first met Reza.

It turned out Domenico knew a lot of people in London already.

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He invited Tara along as his date to a series of lavish parties hosted by his profligate friends, where the finest wines, champagnes and available girls flowed in abundance. Once there, however, he all but ignored Tara, making constant suggestive comments to other women and basically enjoying catching up with people she neither knew nor particularly liked, and many of whom she found trashy.

The parties culminated in the much older Reza's fiftieth birthday extravaganza. This began with various dinners and luncheons held at Nobu Berkeley and the original Nobu, and at China Tang and Cipriani. Restaurants where babies are conceived in cupboards, where all the American Express cards are black and unlimited, and all the women eye-wateringly hot. To crown the celebrations, Reza hosted a party for four hundred guests at his Mayfair mansion. For the occasion Reza had commissioned a life-sized sculpture of himself and had it positioned in the triple-height hallway on the spot where a replica of Michelangelo's David usually stood. On arrival, all guests were given an iPod packaged in an ornate platinum case. It came ready loaded with pictures of Reza throughout his fifty years, many of which Tara suspected had undergone a healthy amount of Photoshopping. Reza's favourite music was also on there, along with a tribute song recorded by a variety of well known personalities, including someone who sounded suspiciously like the Pope.

Tara was astounded when the smooth black floor of one of the five main reception areas suddenly turned transparent, revealing the indoor pool below. A troupe of topless female swimmers in diamond- and ruby-encrusted thongs began performing a synchronized routine to a recording by the recently deceased musical genius Cantonelli. Reza caught and enjoyed her gasp of surprise

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and strutted over, running a deeply tanned hand over his thinning hair, dyed brown to disguise the grey. Without bothering to introduce himself to Tara or ask her name, he stood beside her and gazed down through the glass at one of the swimmers below. She was face down in the rippled water and her muscled legs were now parted in a rather undignified split. It looked painful, and even more so with a row of priceless gems wedged between her buttocks.

‘Infuriating that Cantonelli died just days before he could perform here. I had him scheduled to play in person. I would have been the very first person to have Cantonelli perform at home. If he’d only died just a week later, I’d have been the only man ever.’

Tara didn’t quite know what to say to that so Reza continued talking, eyes still glued to the girl in the pool. He licked his lips. Tara thought he was sweating a little. He hadn’t looked at her once since he’d come over and that in itself was annoying her. She was in her purple velvet off-the-shoulder vintage mini-dress, which revealed acres of leg. Her grandmother’s diamond-and-pearl earrings shimmered at her earlobes and her newest sample-sale find – super-high, nude patent ankle boots from Christian Louboutin – finished off the outfit. She had teamed this with minimal make-up and artfully messed-up hair falling out of a loose knot on top of her head. Was Reza ever going to tear his pervy eyes from that girl’s bum?

‘I’m getting nervous about those gems,’ Reza declared. ‘But at least I’ve had my team of specialists develop special chemicals to make sure the water doesn’t diminish their sparkle. Of course the chemicals are not great for the girls, but ...’ With that he finally looked up and met her eye. In heels she was far taller than him

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and had a clear view of the bald patch he'd attempted to cover up. 'Why are you here?' he asked.

'Oh, I, er, well, I came with your friend, my boyfriend Domenico.' Tara was taken aback by the abruptness of Reza's question and looked around anxiously for Domenico. She needed him to come and bridge the gap between them. Where on earth was he?

Suddenly Reza turned purple with fury. 'Domenico you great big Italian idiot, get the hell out of my pool!' Tara looked down and was crushed to find a drunken Domenico flailing around in the pool, looking like a mischievous child caught with his hand in the candy jar.

That was the end of their summer affair. Having had the opportunity to scrutinize Domenico away from the slyly deceiving Riviera sun, Tara came to see him as the sleaze that he really was and found she didn't miss him. She was, however, intrigued by the crazy opulence of his set. She was used to moving among the fashionable and the Old Money of English society – she'd grown up with many of them – but very few had the show-stopping wealth of the international super-rich. Wealth that ran into the billions, not millions; that could commission whole teams of scientists to design its own chemicals just so that a girl could wear diamonds underwater. So when she bumped into Reza again weeks later, at a showbiz restaurant opening to which she and Abena had both wangled an invitation, she was secretly delighted that he recognized her.

He asked for her and Abena's numbers so that he could invite them to what he called a 'humble gathering' he was planning for the New Year. This turned out to be a spectacular concert at the Royal Albert Hall, which he'd hired out for the evening, followed

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by a huge firework display in Hyde Park. With the world's most eminent classical performers assembled in one room, Reza's guests listened, enraptured, for the first twenty minutes. Then they gossiped, flirted, competed, and scoffed handmade chocolate truffles and champagne for the remaining hour. The gathering was about as humble as the Palace of Versailles, and immense fun. With so much going on and so many people around, Tara and Abena barely needed to speak to Reza at all and had themselves a great time instead.

Fast-forward a few months and his assistant was including the young girlfriends on Reza's summer guest list.

In their flat in a dodgy street in Ladbroke Grove, conveniently close to the more upmarket areas of Notting Hill, Abena and Tara were preparing for a browse around the vintage shops and boutiques of Portobello Market. Abena picked up her keys, her head still shaking with amusement at the cheekiness of hideous Reza's requesting a photograph, as though choosing an escort from a website, and asked Tara whether she was ready to go. She dropped her keys into her roomy, soft, brown leather tote, newly purchased online at a discount. They were immediately lost among the mess of make-up, fashion magazines, her digital camera, a dog-eared copy of Wordsworth's poems and several men's business cards. Really, she seemed to collect these cards in the most random of places and could never remember who anyone was. Once she'd got so confused that she called up a homosexual masseur, Sam T, to arrange a hot date, thinking he was Sam C who she'd met at a party. She thought it was odd that he worked at a spa but had just assumed he was on the business side there. Meanwhile a dribbling

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medic who'd told her she looked like Naomi Campbell's petite younger sister and whose card she'd only taken out of politeness thought Christmas had come early when she asked him, instead of Sam T, over to hers for a full-body massage. Well, she was in a hurry and the damned card said something about chiropractic!

Moments later, the young women were strutting side by side through the stalls of Portobello, watching all the fashionable girls pick up edgy trinkets and garments, and secretly enjoying, but pretending not to notice, the admiring glances of all the boys. Even among the experimental fashionistas at the market the pair stood out. Abena wore a retro blazer over an ex-boyfriend's oversized wife-beater vest knotted at the hip. Skinny blue jeans and towering wedge heels gave her some much appreciated extra inches. Tara had dressed quickly in a black corset which, in her own inimitable way she had thrown on top of a thin silk Meadham Kirchhoff blouse. She too wore jeans but hers were ripped and wonderfully ancient and were tucked into flat, slouchy, even more ancient fringed boots.

'Hon, this would look incredible on you,' Abena commented as she pulled out a fuchsia silk dress and held it up in front of her friend.

'Mmmn, that's stunning,' Tara agreed, stroking the silky lining before casually checking the price tag. Her face reddened. 'It is a bit mumsy though,' she muttered in a change of heart, and placed it reluctantly back on the rack.

Tara wasn't conventionally beautiful. She was bony and pale, with bad skin, thin and lifeless blonde hair and a smallish mouth so crammed with large teeth that she'd been described as 'horsey' in the past. Yet there was something about her. She knew how to

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turn her tall, pale skinniness into a fashion statement that people aspired to, and her skin problems she covered expertly with high-end concealers and foundations. The lankness of her light blonde hair fitted with the slightly grungy look championed by Kate, Agyness and the other top British models – ultra-groomed, big, bouffant hair was for pop star wannabes and footballers' wives.

They continued to browse the various collectors' stands, quietly despairing at some of the prices, until Tara stopped suddenly and turned. Mischief danced in her wide blue eyes.

'Abbi, we *deserve* a break! Why don't we take Reza up on his offer and go with them to St Tropez? You know what he's like; it's all for show. When has he ever seriously tried anything on? I mean, I'd be surprised if he can actually get his feeble little dick up any more ... And if by some sick twist it turns out that he can, well, I'm sure one of the 'models' will be more than happy to oblige. Come on, a smart holiday – what's the worst that could happen?'

Abena contemplated this for a moment and hooted with laughter. The way Tara had put it made it seem downright silly to turn the invitation down. She was single, apparently attractive, twenty-two, and this was her time. She had sailed through school and secured a good degree at Oxford, despite her incessant partying. Now she needed to make a life for herself and fulfil the potential she knew she had – that everybody has, even if some people are lazy about jumping on opportunities. Why not enjoy a break in the sun with her girlfriend? Who knew, she might meet the love of her life there. She'd set her sights considerably higher than the chinless types of Notting Hill. Neither were the faux bohemians any better – no matter how grubby your clothes look, or however many hours of alternative yoga you do, if you can afford the rents

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in Notting Hill then you ain't the bohemian free-spirit you fancy yourself to be.

Abena was becoming dismally disillusioned by a seemingly endless string of disastrous dates and disappointing boyfriends. Sod any misgivings. Why not see what was out there? Give herself up entirely to whatever the summer might bring.

She so desperately wanted to fall in love.

'OK, let's do it.' The pair exchanged guilty grins. 'Reza and his crew know that neither you nor I are "that sort" anyway.'

'Exactly,' Tara affirmed, a touch more strongly than was necessary.

'Shall we ask a couple of the others – safety in numbers? Perhaps Sarah will want to come along too?' Abena added as an afterthought.

'He said WHAT?' exclaimed Sarah on the phone, wrinkling up her button nose. 'That is obscene!' The wholesome, jolly-hockey-sticks side to Sarah left her unamused by the invitation. 'There is absolutely no way I am letting a fifty-something Syrian Lothario fly me out to the South of France and put me up on his yacht for the weekend, and definitely not on the basis of a photograph!'

'Darling, relax,' soothed Abena, 'you're making me feel seedy.' Then she saw Tara yawning dramatically at Sarah's response and, stifling a giggle, felt better.

Although Abena was immensely fond of her friend Sarah, Tara had always thought her terribly bourgeois and so was not at all surprised to see her putting on a show of middle-class righteousness at the mere idea of decadence and glamour.

'God, hon,' Tara wailed, 'purlease let Sarah stay at home with

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her miserable excuse of a boyfriend and her earnest endeavours at the local paper. You and I'll have much more fun on the trip as a double act and anyway you've never been to the French Riviera have you? Peasant! We can lose Reza and his lot and get into all sorts of compromising scrapes with rock stars and eccentric aristos,' she laughed.

'Yeah, well then they'd better be of the moneyed kind, not the impoverished stock you're from,' Abena hit back. 'Little Miss Worldly, one of my exes has an apartment in Monaco. It might do you good to remember that while you were pissing around with Domenico, I was even further away, having a wild time in Lagos watching Kunle play polo for his father's team. Harrumph.' Abena grinned.

'True,' Tara replied. 'Sadly neither of us was back at Oxford where we should have been.'

'Well, all's well that ends well – we got our degrees didn't we? And the real fun starts here.' Abena bopped up and down on the spot then planted a big kiss on Tara's cheek. This was going to be one hell of a holiday.

The biggest bruise stretched across her ribs, forming an ugly red blotch under her heart.

Natalya stood naked in front of the mirror and surveyed the damage before turning and climbing into the marble bath. She lay back, closed her eyes, and let Mozart transport her to a kinder world. She lay dreaming for some time while the water soothed her young body, still aching from the previous night. Had the

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beeping of her mobile not jolted her back to reality, she would have lain longer, enjoying its gentleness. Drying herself with a fluffy white towel and wandering through to the bedroom, she reached for her BlackBerry. The message made her gasp:

RE: St Tropez!

Please email me all your details and a picture if possible as we are starting to arrange our summer in the sun.

Let me know what passport you have and if you need a visa for France. Yeah, yeah, yeah, summer is on its way!

Natalya trembled. Though it was only April, Reza was already thinking about jetting out to St Tropez, and this breezy message from his young assistant, Henry – permanently bronzed and waxed like Reza himself, except that Henry was blond and gay and Reza was dark and very straight – confirmed what Natalya had been hoping for. That she would be accompanying Reza and his set on some of their weekend jaunts to the French Riviera. She would be flown from one glamorous location to another in Reza's private plane. She would stay on the 120-foot yacht, moored far enough from the shore to distance the privileged party from any less fortunate onlookers, but certainly close enough to ensure that all could admire the splendour and opulence of the vessel, and the glamour and beauty of the girls aboard it. She might get a shopping trip thrown in – a new Cartier watch, perhaps. Most importantly, though, here was a chance to escape Gregory's brutal and unsophisticated clutches and seek out a gentler, more malleable man. Perhaps he'd be even older; less libidinous, more giving ... appreciative of the beauty of youth.

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Natalya skipped across the room to her walk-in wardrobe. Pushing aside rack after rack of designer gowns, jeans and fitted sweatshirts, she burrowed her way to the summer section at the back and emerged with an armful of cut-out swimsuits, bikini briefs and tops. Starting with the bejewelled two-piece, she worked her way carefully through each bikini outfit – adding a beach skirt here or a kaftan there – until she'd tried on her entire collection. At long last she studied her reflection for the final time. Standing hand on hip in a pink tasselled Dior two-piece, a wide-brimmed straw hat, giant dark shades and five-inch Cavalli heels, she groaned before throwing herself back on to the magnificent four-poster bed. No, she decided, I look hot as hell and I know where that always gets me.

What she needed was a change of strategy. No more nubile and eager Riviera dolly – that made her *far* too desirable to men, which, ultimately, would work against her. Men, the simple creatures, could never reconcile themselves to the fact that a girl can be both sensationally sexy and devoted and homely at the same time. If she was to snare the oligarch she wanted for good – and not just for good times – it was essential that she dress the part. Out with the ostentatious tasselled Dior and in with the subtle sexiness of a white Chanel one-piece, set off against her cocoa tan and freshly highlighted choppy layers. To that she would add a couple of flirty dresses in pastel shades, but nothing too clingy. Only elegant or cutesy would achieve the desired effect. She'd make men fall off their yachts in their haste to protect her and keep her in the lifestyle she so desperately wanted in these uncertain times.

Natalya had intended to avoid Gregory for a while after his

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especially rough handling last night, but she needed to be taken shopping. And since her last modelling job had been another 'hugely prestigious editorial', which would secure her great exposure but no pay cheque, she was left with no other choice than to make amends. Reluctantly, she picked up her mobile and dialled Gregory's number. He answered immediately, his heavy breathing perceptible even before the phone had reached his mistress's ear.

'Baby is that you? Why didn't you return my calls? Did you get my messages?'

She rolled her eyes. As she purred into the phone, a sexy Latvian twang could be detected in her accent. 'I hef been missing you bébé ...' she breathed. 'Come over to Knightsbridge. I want cock.'