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Sweet Temptation

Written by Lucy Diamond

Published by Pan Books

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Lucy
Diamond

SWEET
TEMPTATION

PAN BOOKS



First published 2010 by Pan Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-330-46436-9

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Typeset by SetSystems Ltd, Saffron Walden, Essex
Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

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Chapter One

Stuffed

Maddie

Most embarrassing moment ever? I've had a few. One was when I walked down Harborne High Street with my skirt accidentally tucked into my knickers. I noticed people sniggering and pointing but assumed they were just the usual type of idiots who think overweight people are either deaf or totally immune to hurtful comments.

When a kind woman eventually stopped me outside the Oxfam shop to tell me that I was giving pedestrians a cheeky eyeful (in both senses of the word), I thought I might die with sheer mortification. Someone actually cheered as I yanked my skirt down at the back to cover myself up, and I felt my face flood with hot, humiliated colour. It took two almond croissants and a large cappuccino at Caffé Nero

Lucy Diamond

before I could even think about venturing out onto the street again.

Needless to say, that haunted me for ages, but then something happened at work last summer that was even more cringeworthy. More embarrassing, even, than the time I was seven years old and got my head stuck in a gate (for over an hour), or when I fell backwards into a lake trying to take a photo of my family.

I worked part-time at one of the big radio stations in Birmingham and I loved it. Well, I had done until recently, anyway. Radio had been a friend to me ever since I was a shy teenager in the shadow of my glamour-puss mum. My dad was long gone by then – and good riddance to him – so it was just the two of us, me and Mum, at home. I say just the two of us, but she wasn't exactly one for the quiet life. She'd throw cocktail parties and soirées every weekend, filling the house with chic, tinkly-laughing friends and hearty blokes with booming voices from the theatre. I was always invited to join them, but the thought terrified me so much, I'd inevitably huddle upstairs with my radio and a bag of pick 'n' mix instead.

That radio kept me company on many, many evenings. My favourite DJ was a honey-voiced guy called Alex Morley who made me feel as if he was speaking just to me. I imagined him as tall and rangy with shaggy, sandy-coloured hair, sparkling blue eyes and battered denim

Sweet Temptation

jeans. (Think sexy Sawyer from *Lost*, with a Dudley accent.) I would sit curled up in my beanbag, munching jelly snakes and flicking through *Smash Hits* magazine while Alex played me tunes. Imagine how gutted I was when Mum sent off for a signed photo of him for me and he turned out to be jowly and slightly boss-eyed with what looked suspiciously like a bad comb-over.

No matter. I was already in love with the power of radio, how it made me feel less alone, how I was able to lose myself in that world. I forgave Alex his bad hair and well-covered cheekbones (who was I to talk, anyway?) and began coveting a dream that never really went away – that one day it would be me talking into a microphone, making somebody else feel more connected to the world . . .

Not that *that* was likely in my job, unfortunately. I was a broadcast assistant at Brum FM, and had been lucky enough to work for Chip Barrett, the smooth-tongued silver fox who'd presented the lunchtime slot for years and was a big favourite among 'ladies of a certain age'. But since the new controller, Andy, had come in, he'd been trying to make the station cooler and more current. So poor old Chip had been relegated to the dawn shift, and his programme now went out between two and six in the morning. Meanwhile, they'd only gone and hired the meanest bitch in the country to take his place . . . and that was who I currently had the misfortune to work for.

‘Good morning, Birmingham! This is Collette McMahon, here to put a twinkle in your eye and a smile on your face,’ she would say at the start of her show every day. Ironic really, because while she was saying all that nice-nice stuff, she’d usually be gesturing ferociously at me or pressing *Send* on an email that read ‘*MADDIE, WE ARE OUT OF COFFEE IN HERE!!!!*’

This inevitably made me feel like slapping her – *This is Maddie Lawson, here to put a sharp stick in your eye and a smack on your face, Collette!* – because one, I hated emails in capitals (way too shouty), and two, it wasn’t my job to make her sodding coffee, and well she knew it.

(And did I mention that she was whip-thin and very attractive, with shoulder-length black hair and smoky grey eyes? Just to make matters worse.)

On this particular day, Collette was late. Again. Her show started at eleven in the morning, and we were both meant to be in for ten o’clock on the dot so that we could go through the running order with the producer, Becky, and get everything ready in plenty of time. When Chip was doing the show, he was always in the studio from nine, writing his links and deliberating over his playlist – a consummate professional. But Collette breezed in whenever she fancied it. The first week she’d generally made it to her desk by 10.15, but on this day it was nearer 10.30 when she finally sauntered through the door.

Sweet Temptation

‘Jeez, it’s hot out there,’ she said, slinging her bag onto the desk and pushing her big designer sunglasses up onto her head. She had a loud, rather posh voice – she was from Surrey, originally – and liked everyone to know that she had entered the building. ‘How are we doing? All set for a great show?’

Becky looked irritated. ‘Collette . . . you tell me,’ she replied. ‘Where have you been?’

Collette pulled a face. ‘No need to get uptight,’ she said. She glanced in my direction as if noticing me for the first time. ‘Get us a coffee, love, I’m parched. Bit of a late one last night.’

No *please*, note. And that annoying ‘love’, as if I was sixteen and a work-experience girl or something, when I was actually a year older than her, the stupid cow.

I was about to rise out of my seat when Becky put a hand on my arm to stop me.

‘Maddie doesn’t have time to run around making you coffee,’ she said coldly. ‘We need her here with us to prepare for the show. So . . . if you’re ready, let’s go through today’s running order. We’re on air in less than half an hour now, so let’s make it quick.’

Looking miffed, Collette shouted through to one of the secretaries for coffee instead, glaring daggers at me as if it were *my* fault.

Finally, we were able to get down to business. Collette’s

show was a mixture of music and chat with different phone-ins and quizzes according to the day of the week. Part of my job was to put together the skeleton running order for Becky's approval, research local news items Collette might want to talk about, and arrange guest interviews. Chip had always liked the human-interest stories – the Good Samaritan in the street, or the local girl with leukaemia who was getting treated to a Disneyland trip, that sort of thing. Becky and I were still finding our feet with Collette's taste. So far, she only seemed interested in poking fun at celebrities and passing on gossipy rumours.

'Okay,' I started, going through my notes. 'So we've got the midweek phone-in at 11.15 – we could do something about the school summer holidays starting soon—'

'Nah.'

I gaped in shock at the way Collette had cut me dead. 'Um . . . well, lots of our listeners are mums, so—'

'So the last thing they want to talk about is school bloody holidays, babe!' she snorted. 'Ever heard of escapism? What else have you got?'

I glanced down at my notes, my face burning. Chip would never have spoken to me like that. 'Well . . . the Birmingham Restaurant Awards are tonight,' I began tentatively. 'So maybe . . .'

She clicked her teeth. 'Not very sexy,' she said. 'Look,

Sweet Temptation

leave it with me – I'll come up with something better for the phone-in. What else?

And so it went on, with Becky getting similar treatment. Collette didn't like the sound of Phil the Chef's Wednesday Recipe – 'It's kind of dull, isn't it? Get him to give us another one, something more exotic.' She rolled her eyes at the mention of the samba band who were coming in to play some tunes, and actually yawned when Becky reminded her about the Midday Quiz.

'We'd better set up,' Becky snapped at that point, twisting one of her auburn corkscrew curls taut around her finger (always a bad sign). 'Collette, you're just going to have to wing the rest, I'm afraid. Maddie, can you keep on top of the links, please.'

'No worries,' Collette said, cool as a cucumber, sashaying into the studio.

'Of course,' I said, not feeling in the slightest bit cool. I was used to live radio programmes now, of course, but Chip always ran a tight ship, with every minute of the three-hour programme accounted for. With Collette discounting half the material Becky and I had put together, the running order was looking horribly light.

I needn't have worried, though. Collette had plenty to say. Most of it was stuff she'd got straight out of the *Sun*, and there was quite a long phone-in that revolved around slagging off the *Big Brother* contestants before she started a

monologue about whether or not she was going to get her hair cut short at the weekend.

Then she segued into her bombshell.

‘You’ve got to look your best for summer, isn’t that right, people?’ she cooed into the mike. ‘That’s why I’m starting the Make Birmingham Beautiful campaign right here, right now. For the next few months, all my team at Brum FM are going to embark on a new beauty regime.’

Becky looked flustered. ‘What’s she talking about?’ she hissed to me. We were sitting a few metres away from Collette, but separated from her by the studio’s sound-proof glass panel. ‘Do you know anything about this?’

‘No,’ I said, feeling nervous. I didn’t like the spiteful light in Collette’s eyes as she glanced over at me.

‘I, for example, will be road-testing some beauty goodies kindly sent to us by the Bliss Spa at Perfect Body Gym,’ she wittered. ‘And I’ll be posting “before” and “after” photos on my DJ blog, so watch out for those! I’ve also got some hair lotions and potions from Saks for Becky, our lovely producer, to try out.’

Becky smiled – with relief, I think – and gave Collette a thumbs-up.

‘What about our hunky controller, Andy Fleming?’ Collette continued. ‘Now, he’s my boss, so I’ve got a special treat for him – a Man Spa session at Serenity – the lucky fella! Let’s hope he remembers that when it comes

Sweet Temptation

to the annual pay rise, eh, Andy?’ She laughed at her own joke, then her gaze swivelled to me. I felt like a mouse being eyed up by a cobra and flinched.

‘As for Maddie, our super assistant . . .’ Collette cooed, her eyes glittering. She paused for a moment, then smiled a killer smile. ‘Well . . . she’s on a mission to beat the bulge! Yes, that’s right – Maddie’s going to try out a FatBusters weight-watching class. There are sessions running in all sorts of places around the city, so log on to our website if you’re interested in losing a few pounds yourself. I’ll let you know how we all get on in a fortnight, so don’t miss that . . .’

Snap. The mouse was history, the cobra victorious.

My hands were trembling, my mouth was dry and I felt a huge lump in my throat as if I was going to cry with embarrassment. It took every last shred of pride I had not to walk out of the studio there and then.

‘Are you all right, Maddie?’ Becky asked in concern. Collette had put on the latest Girls Aloud track and was bopping around as if she hadn’t a care in the world.

I couldn’t look at her, or reply. Collette’s words were still sinking in, stinging through me. *She’s on a mission to beat the bulge! Maddie’s going to try out a FatBusters weight-watching class!*

The horrible, horrible woman. The bitch. Everyone had been given nice treats, except me. I’d been made the laughing stock.

Lucy Diamond

‘Maddie? Are you okay?’

I nodded mutely at Becky, not trusting myself to speak. Collette McMahon had just told thousands of listeners that I was fat and needed to do something about it. She had humiliated me in front of the whole city.

I put my big fat head in my big fat hands and wished the world would go away.

I was skinny as a child. Tall and skinny, long bony legs and pointy elbows. But somehow or other, that all changed. Somehow or other, I got bigger and bigger and bigger until I was five foot ten and seventeen stone. Half woman, half dumpling, that was me.

I would feel people’s gazes upon me in the supermarket. Their eyes would swerve from me straight into my trolley, obviously expecting to see a teetering mountain of crisps and chocolate biscuits piled high. I’d ignore them and load in more fruit and vegetables. They weren’t expecting that, were they? I enjoyed the looks of surprise. Mind you, they didn’t know that I ordered the other stuff online. It came in a van when the children were at school – my secret treats: slabs of cheese, bags of Kettle Chips and those fun-size chocolate bars you give out at children’s parties. *See, I’m being good*, I’d tell myself as I ripped open a mini Mars bar and sank my teeth into it. Only a titchy little bar of chocolate for me!

Sweet Temptation

Then I'd go and spoil it by scoffing another four later in the day, but somehow managed to overlook that. Anyway, I ate those ones standing up at the cupboard. *That doesn't count*, I convinced myself.

The problem was, I loved food. Always had done. I could read a recipe book just for the sheer enjoyment – mmmm, chicken pie and mashed potato with gravy ... oooh, loin of pork with garlic and bay leaves ... marinated lamb on rosemary potatoes ... I would sit in bed trying not to salivate on the pages.

And entertaining – oh, yes. Loved it. Nothing better than friends and family around the table, kitchen steaming with fragrant cooking smells, me flushed in the face and happy, serving up a huge roast, a tray of Yorkshires, crispy golden spuds and all the trimmings. The *oohs* and *abbhs* and *this is so delicious* and *Maddie, you're a star!* What was not to like?

The flipside was, I hated the way I looked. Loathed it. I didn't bother checking in the mirror any more – I didn't want to play count-the-chins. The fat seemed to have crept all over me like a wobbly pink covering. I bulged over my kneecaps. There were distinct, countable rolls around my waist. You could barely see my ankles, they were so puffy. When I sat down, I always worried I'd break the chair.

I dreamed of having slim, shapely legs again, a flat stomach, a handful of a bottom. I secretly wished I had the bottle (and money) for liposuction or a tummy tuck.

Thankfully Paul didn't seem to mind. Paul was my husband and he liked big girls. 'More to hold onto,' he said fondly, if rather unromantically. 'You still look like a princess to me, babe.'

At least one of us thought so, eh?

The very next day, things got worse still. More humiliation. More embarrassment. It was the mums' race at my kids' school sports day: welcome to Hell.

That morning, I was light-headed from a sleepless night, still feeling vulnerable from the embarrassment of the day before. Sensing weakness, my daughter Emma pounced.

'Mum, have you remembered it's sports day this afternoon?' she asked. 'You *are* going, aren't you?'

'Um...' I began, buttering toast, my back to her and her brother. I had the afternoon off and I'd planned to get the shears out and do some major hacking in the jungle that was our neglected back garden.

'Oh go on, Mum, you *never* come to sports day!' Ben complained. 'All the other mums do.'

'I really want you to see me in the three-legged race with Amber,' Emma added. 'We've been practising loads and we're dead fast. We might even win!'

I kept schtum. The thing was, I was quite happy to watch *them* running races up and down the playing field,

Sweet Temptation

but I'd heard all the horror stories about the obligatory mums' race from years gone by, and there was absolutely no way on earth I was getting dragged into *that*.

'It *is* my last year at Highbridge,' Emma went on, an accusing note appearing in her voice. 'And you haven't come to one single sports day. Last year, when I won the sack race, I really wished you'd been there, but—'

I was starting to feel harassed. I'm not my sharpest at 7.45 in the morning and stood no chance against the wiles of a ten-year-old girl.

'I do have a *job!*' I pointed out, bringing the plate of toast to the table and helping myself to a slice.

'Not this afternoon,' Emma countered smartly. 'You only do a half-day on Thursday, don't you? You can easily make it.' Her eyes narrowed, and then she delivered the sucker punch. 'If you're interested, that is. If you *care!*'

'Oh, Emma,' I sighed. 'Of course I care!' Her words stung me with guilt. 'Oh . . . okay, then,' I found myself saying, defeated. One poxy sports day. One stupid mums' race, which would be over in a matter of minutes. How bad could it be?

This bad, was the answer, I realized several hours later. I was tense even before the gun had gone off – my heart jumpy, my whole body clenched with nerves. A fat sun glared down, bathing us all in harsh white light. The other

runners were muttering to one other in low voices, but I was so churned up inside, I couldn't concentrate, couldn't move. Why had I allowed myself to get talked into this?

The mums alongside me on the starting line all seemed to be wearing skimpy vest tops and shorts, sunlight bouncing off their toned, tanned skin. I was the blob on the horizon, the only one in fat-lady slacks and a long baggy top, showing as little flesh as possible. All of a sudden, I wished I hadn't had that fourth piece of toast for breakfast. Or the lunchtime bag of thick salty chips. Or the Snowdonia of cakes and chocolate and cheese and pasta I'd scoffed in the last week . . .

Shut up, Maddie, I told myself. *What's done is done*. Besides, there were two beaming faces in the crowd, waving and making encouraging thumbs-up signs at me. The knot inside melted a little as I remembered how lovely it had been watching Emma and her friend Amber win second place in the three-legged race, a triumph of hasty hobbling, their faces radiant with smiles as they crossed the line. And as for Ben's look of sheer joy when he'd surged past the other Year Twos to romp home in first place in the egg and spoon race . . . bless him, I'd had to stop myself from punching the air in pride. Goodness only knew how a tubster like me had ever managed to produce two such lithe, athletic children.

There was an undercurrent of jostling at the start line

Sweet Temptation

as Mrs Gable, the deputy head, looked our way and held up the starting pistol. Near me in the crowd I noticed Vanessa Gray, wearing expensive-looking running shoes, with that glint in her eye – the same determined look I'd seen at many PTA meetings in the past when she'd ensured the vote had gone her way on the summer fair stall allocations and the venue for the PTA committee night out. I clocked her surreptitiously sliding her left elbow in front of Jane Willis and inching her foot forward.

'On your marks...'

Oh God. This was really happening. Fear sloshed around inside me like water in a washing machine.

'Get set...'

Vanessa Gray was tensed, knees slightly bent, a jaguar poised to spring in Lycra cycling shorts and a perfect, glossy ponytail.

BANG!

We were off – forty or so mums pounding down the school playing field, high-pitched shrieks and cheers from the spectators ringing in our ears. Vanessa sprinted ahead like a woman possessed. She had probably been training for this all year.

I, on the other hand, was panting as if my chest was going to explode. *Thud-thud-thud* went my feet in my trainers. (Gleaming white. Bought as part of a New Year's resolution. Worn for the first time today, six months

later.) I was puffing like a steam engine, my face shiny and hot, going as fast as I could. Somehow, though, the other mums were getting away from me.

My fake smile tightened as I became stranded at the back of the pack. Ahead of me was a sea of pert bottoms, legs scissoring forward, elbows pumping. Behind me, just my own lumbering shadow. I grimaced as Vanessa Gray charged over the finishing line in first place, arms thrown up in victory as if she were Paula sodding Radcliffe. There was a smattering of reluctant applause from the teachers. None of them liked her either.

Thud-thud-thud. The audience, one hundred and seventy kids all cross-legged in rows down either side of the playing field, was a blur. Oh help. I was miles behind. Others were over the whitewashed finishing line too now, laughing and wiping their hair out of their eyes. Time seemed to have stopped. Just me left on the field. *Thud-thud-thud.*

Mrs Gable held up the megaphone, well-meaning but oh-so-crushing. 'Come on, Mrs Lawson, you can do it!'

Oh, Christ. Kill me now. Children were sniggering at me. Sniggering at fat, unfit, panting Mrs Lawson as she finally – finally! – waddled over the finishing line. I tried to laugh too. 'Phew,' I said, forcing a smile, though I was more concerned about imminent heart failure. 'Well, that's my exercise for the week!'

Sweet Temptation

Vanessa Gray overheard and gave me a chilly smirk. It said *loser*.

I sought out my children in the crowd, wanting reassurance, needing to see their thumbs still up. But there was Emma, cheeks flushed with embarrassment, catching my eye and scowling before looking pointedly away. And there was Ben, being elbowed and teased by his mates. He had his arms crossed defensively in front of him as he stared down at the grass.

I felt as if I was the worst mother in the country. Shame rose out of me with every panted breath, like steam.

‘Well, do something about it, then!’ Mum said bossily as I sat there in her living room later that evening, having fessed up to the full sports day showdown. ‘Be positive – see it as a motivator. Get off your bum and . . .’

I tried not to groan as she started fiddling with her slick turquoise mobile.

‘Now, where’s the gym number? I know it’s in here . . .’ she muttered.

‘Mum, I’m not going to your gym,’ I told her. ‘I—’

But she already had the phone to her ear and was holding her other hand up imperiously, forbidding me to say any more.

‘Hello, it’s Anna Noble here,’ she purred into the receiver. My mum’s voice was so husky, it almost needed

its own ashtray. ‘Yes, very well, thank you, darling. Just wondering if I could book my daughter in for an induction ... Yes, she’s thinking of joining, that’s right ...’

‘*I am not!*’ I hissed furiously, glaring at her. Oh no. Definitely not. Gyms and me did not go well together. I’d tried exercise, but we weren’t a good match – like chips and custard: a really bad combination.

Up went the hand again, like a policeman directing traffic. *Stop. Do not speak.*

I narrowed my eyes at her, but she was writing something down and didn’t notice. ‘This Saturday – oh, that’s wonderful, darling, thank you. And perhaps a day pass for the rest of the family? Yes, one adult and two children. That’s marvellous. Appreciate it. Bye now.’

My mum was a bit of a legend. You’d probably remember her as one of the Martini girls in the early Eighties, back when advertising regulations were slightly more relaxed about sexing up alcoholic products. She was the particularly beautiful one in the white swimsuit diving into a bottle of Bianco; she was on all the billboards around Brum for years while that campaign ran. I used to get teased about it at school – ‘Saw your mum’s boobs this morning’ and so on – but I didn’t mind. I was dead proud of her. Besides, the ads had paid for the big house in Edgbaston where she’d lived ever since, and had spring-

Sweet Temptation

boarded her later career as an actress. These days, the long hair had become a sleek chestnut bob, and there were a few wrinkles on her neck, but she still had those smouldering almond-shaped eyes and fabulous legs. And clearly she still thought she could order me about like a child.

She clicked off the phone now, a look of triumph on her face.

‘There. You’re booked in to see someone called Jacob on Saturday morning at ten o’clock,’ she told me, getting up and raising the crystal decanter in my direction. ‘Sherry?’

‘But I don’t want to go to the gym!’ I told her. I was a thirty-four-year-old woman but I felt like a petulant teenager again. ‘I don’t want to see this Jacob, I...’ She was still holding the decanter, eyebrows raised, as if she hadn’t heard my outburst. ‘No, thanks,’ I mumbled, gritting my teeth.

She splashed some sherry into a glass for herself and sipped it. Then she came over to sit next to me on the huge red sofa, folding her legs underneath her gracefully.

‘Darling,’ she said in a matter-of-fact way. ‘You came here for help. I’m not going to pat you on the back like Paul and say, “Never mind, you’re still beautiful to me.”’

I lowered my gaze, feeling irritated. Paul had indeed done just that when I’d poured out the story to him. *Never*

Lucy Diamond

mind, I still think you're gorgeous. Now, what's for tea? He'd barely seemed to listen or care, just trotted out the words he thought I'd want to hear.

'I'm your mother,' she went on, like I needed reminding. 'I can get away with a few home truths. Yes, you're my lovely Maddie, the most wonderful daughter and human being I've ever had the pleasure of knowing.' My eyes prickled at the unexpected compliment. 'But yes, you're also overweight and very unfit. And I'm going to help you sort yourself out.'

I fell silent, wishing I'd said yes to the sherry now. A pint of the stuff.

'So Saturday it is, then,' she told me, and that was that.