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Opening Extract from...

Welcome to Rosie Hopkins' Sweetshop of Dreams

Written by Jenny Colgan

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SPHERE

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Chapter One

Soor Plooms

This is a Scots term that translates as sour plums, but in its original language imitates exactly the contortions of your mouth as soon as you pop one in.

More of an endurance exercise than a treat, this is a hard candy of exquisite, roof-of-the-mouth-stripping bitter intensity; the occasional rush of sweetness comes as a blessed relief. Near-impossible to bite and still maintain an entire set of teeth, they are therefore the ideal purchase for the pocket-money-strapped child as, number one, they last for ever, and number two they are something of a rarefied taste and therefore require less sharing than other sweets.

Downsides include being a choking hazard; their bright green colour which renders them very visible to teachers, and their density – a correctly projected soor ploom can knock out a dog from forty feet.



Rosie put the very peculiar book down. She was in any case sitting near the front of the bus, hopping up every now and again, anxiously; trying to peer through the grimy windows. The little single-decker green-painted bus with ripped, ancient leather seats looked like it should have been retired years ago. Why was the countryside so *dark*? Every time they left a tiny village with a few streetlights, it felt like they hit a great sea of blackness, a vast wall of nothingness surrounding a few scattered remnants of civilisation.

Rosie, a city girl born and bred, wasn't used to it at all. It was sinister up there. How could anyone live amid so much dark? The few people who had joined the bus in Derby, old ladies mostly, and a couple of foreign-speaking young men whom Rosie took to be farm workers, had all got off ages ago. She'd asked the driver, who had an enormous beard, to tell her when they got to Lipton, but he'd grunted at her in a non-committal way, which meant that now she was hopping up and down nervously every time they entered a village, trying to figure out from his head movements whether it was this one or not.

Rosie stared at her reflection in the dark window of the bus. Her dark curly bob was held back with hair clips above a button nose full of freckles. Her large soft-grey eyes were probably her best feature, but now they looked worried, lost and anxious. A sturdy suitcase sat above her in the ancient luggage rack, feeling irrevocably heavy; reminding her that there was no easy route back. People's lives, she thought to herself, were meant to be full of excitement, lightness and freedom. Hers was just baggage. She checked her phone to ring Gerard, but there was no signal.

The bus chuffed and coughed up another endless hill into nothingness. Rosie had thought England was a small country, but she had never ever felt so far away from everything she had known. She glanced anxiously at the driver, hoping he had remembered she was still there.



That last day at work, though. Really, when you thought about it, her mother couldn't have chosen to ring at a better time.

'Where the *hell* is that sodding bedpan? What the *hell* is going on here? What do you think you're doing?'

The young doctor didn't look more than twenty years old, and absolutely terrified to boot. He was covering his terror by being aggressive; Rosie had seen it a million times before. She rushed to his side; every other nurse had disappeared from view and he was trying to help an old lady who appeared to be reacting to the lancing of a particularly unpleasant boil by peeing the bed at the same time. Which would have been fine, but Rosie had only been on the ward ten minutes, and no one had bothered to give her even the most cursory tour – she didn't blame the staff nurses, they were up to their eyeballs, and there were different agency nurses in every day.

So she had tried unobtrusively to change sheets, bring water to those who needed it and take lunch orders, and do the tea round and empty the bedpans and the sharps boxes and generally help as much as she could without getting in anyone's way, even though she'd worked a twelve-hour day in a different hospital across town the day before and was still

absolutely exhausted, but was terrified that the agency would take her off their roster if she ever turned a job down.

Meanwhile the very young, rather posh-looking doc was getting positively hosed with pee and pus, which might, Rosie tried not to think, have been funny under different circumstances. As it was, she managed to dart to another elderly patient and grab a large cardboard bedpan, pushing it in front of the doc to catch the remainder like a doubles tennis player.

‘God,’ said the doctor, rudely.

The old woman, in pain and upset, started to cry. Rosie knew the young doctor’s type. Straight out of medical school, he’d have barely met a real patient before. Had spent years in nice lecture theatres, being treated like the *crème de la crème* by his friends and family for being a student doctor, and now getting his first unpleasant wake-up call in the real world; discovering that much medicine was looking after the old, and the poor, and very little was performing dramatic life-saving operations on fashion models.

‘There, there,’ said Rosie, sitting on the bed and comforting the old lady, who was a shapeless bulk beneath her humiliatingly open hospital robe. It was a mixed ward, and the young doc hadn’t even pulled the curtains properly. Rosie did so now. As she did, she heard the shrill tones of someone she could identify even at this distance as the Grade 2.

‘Where’s that bloody agency G grade? They turn up, hide out drinking coffee all day and make twice the wage of everyone else.’

‘I’m here,’ said Rosie, poking her head out. ‘I’ll be right with you.’

‘Now, please,’ said the Grade 2. ‘There’s a mess in the men’s loos you’ll need to sort out. I’d plastic up if I were you.’

It had been a long, long day, not helped by getting home three hours after Gerard to find that the breakfast dishes were still on the table, next to the huge pile of post, and he barely turned round from grunting with a mouthful of pepperoni pizza and Grand Theft Auto. Their little flat needed a window open. And, Rosie thought with a sigh, probably the sheets changed. The chances of her changing another pair of sheets today were, frankly, very small indeed.



So dark, Rosie thought, trying to make out shapes behind the streaky glass of the bus window. It never really got that dark in East London, where she’d grown up. The streetlights, and the cars, and the hum of the traffic and the people and the police helicopter . . . Then, when Mum had left for Australia, she’d moved to St Mary’s, the hospital in Paddington, where you were never far away from sirens and people shouting, and thronged streets. She thrived on living in the city, had always adored London; its shiny side, and the dark side she stitched up on a regular basis when it came in through Accident and Emergency, or post-surgery. She’d even liked the grotty nurses’ lodgings she’d lived in, although buying her own place with Gerard had been . . .

Well, it was grown-up, she supposed. It wasn’t quite what she’d expected – she hadn’t remembered the meeting where she’d volunteered to do all the housework, but he did earn more money. And the fact that it was so tiny, with no prospect of a move on the horizon.

Still, that was adult life, wasn't it? And she and Gerard were settled now. A bit too settled. But settled. She could, it was true, do without all her girlfriends eyeing her deliberately when that Beyoncé song played. They'd been telling her for ages that if he didn't put a ring on her finger by their second anniversary, he wasn't serious and in it for the long term. She had closed her ears and chosen not to believe them – Gerard was cautious, and safe, and didn't make big decisions lightly, and that was one of the reasons why she liked him.

But still, at the end of that long, long day, when her mother had called, she couldn't deny that she was annoyed, cross, feeling hard done by, backed into a corner and emotionally blackmailed – and a teeny tiny part curious.



Their last night had been sweet and sad all at once.

‘It's only six weeks or so,’ she'd reminded Gerard.

‘Yes, so you say,’ he said. ‘You'll be round-the-clock caring from now till the end of time. And I shall stay in London and waste away.’

Gerard rarely looked like he was going to waste away. Round of head and tummy, he had a cheery countenance, like he was always on the verge of a laugh or a joke. Or a sulk, but only Rosie got to see those.

Rosie sighed. ‘I wish you'd come. Just for a bit. A long weekend?’

‘We'll see, we'll see,’ said Gerard. He hated any change to his routine.

Rosie looked at him. They'd been together so long now

she could barely remember when they first met. He'd been at her very first hospital, when she was just out of a nearly all-female nursing college and dizzy with excitement at having a little money and a job. She'd hardly noticed the small, jolly pharmacist, who turned up occasionally when drugs were late, or rare, or urgent, and always had a quip, although she saw he was kind to the patients. He'd make silly remarks to her and she dismissed them as standard banter, until one night he'd joined them on a work night out and made it clear that he was actually a bit more serious than that.

The other, more experienced nurses had giggled and nudged each other, but Rosie hadn't minded about that. She was young, she'd had some pink wine and she was open to new people, and at the end of the night, when he offered to walk her to her tube stop, then tentatively took her hand, she suddenly felt alive with possibility, excited that someone could be so clear about fancying her. She'd often found that kind of thing confusing before; crushing helplessly on men who were out of her league, ignoring chaps with whom she later realised she might have had a chance.

Rosie often felt that she'd missed a meeting every other girl in the world had had, when they were about fourteen, in which they'd learned how the boyfriend-and-girlfriend thing actually worked. Maybe the PE teacher had taken everyone aside, like she did with the period-and-BO talk, and briefed them all thoroughly. This is how to tell who fancies you. This is how to talk to a guy you like without making a complete idiot of yourself. This is how to politely leave a one-night stand and find your way home. It was all a bit of

a mystery to Rosie, and everyone else seemed to find it so easy.

Meeting Gerard at twenty-three seemed like the answer to her prayers – a real, proper boyfriend with a good job. At least it would get her mum off her back for once. And right from the start he'd been keen. She was a bit taken aback to learn he was twenty-eight and still lived with his mother, but hey, everyone knew how expensive London was. And she enjoyed, at least to begin with, having someone to look after; it made her feel grown-up to buy him shirts, and to cook. When, after two years, he suggested they get a place together, she'd been absolutely delighted.

That had been six years ago. They'd bought a tiny grotty flat that they both felt too tired to do up. And since then, nothing. They were, if she was totally honest, in something of a rut, and perhaps a little separation might just . . . She felt disloyal for even thinking it. Even if her best friend Mike was always rolling his eyes. But still. It might just shake them up a little bit.



The bus driver grunted. Rosie jumped up, reaching for her bag, and followed his beard, which he'd nodded in the direction of a tiny pinpoint of light, far away. Rosie realised this must be the village, and that they must be at the top of a big hill. Cripes, where were they, the Alps?



That agency day, Rosie had been looking at the pepperoni pizza box and wondering for the thousandth time how she

could expand Gerard's diet. She liked to cook but he complained that she didn't make anything quite like his mum did, so they ate a lot of takeaways and ready meals. She was also thinking about her job.

She had absolutely loved working in A&E as an auxiliary nurse. It was busy and exhausting and sometimes emotional, but she was never bored and always challenged; occasionally ground down by working at the sharp end of the NHS, but often inspired. She loved it. So of course they closed the unit. Only temporarily, then they were going to reopen it as something called a Minor Injuries Unit, and she was offered the chance either to stay on for that, which didn't sound very exciting, or to relocate, which would mean a longer commute. She'd suggested to Gerard that they move, but he wanted to be close to his own hospital, which was fair enough. Even though an extra bedroom, maybe a little bit of outdoor space, might be . . . Gerard didn't like change, though. She knew that about him.

So, in the meantime, she was doing agency work, filling in for sick or absent auxiliaries wherever she was required, often at only minutes' notice. It had a reputation of being easy money, but Rosie knew now that it was the opposite. It was a grind – everyone used the agency staff to do the absolutely crappiest jobs that they might ordinarily have had to do themselves – the travelling was murder, she often worked double shifts with no days off in between, and every day was like the first day at school, when everyone else knew where things were and how everything worked, and you were left scrabbling in their wake, desperately trying to catch up.

Then, that day, the phone rang.

'Darling!'

Rosie's mother Angie – there was only twenty-two years between them, so sometimes she was Mum and sometimes she was Angie, depending on whether Rosie felt like the younger or the older person in the conversation – still, after two years, found it difficult sometimes to coordinate telephone calls from Australia.

When Rosie called, early in the morning was usually best, but sometimes she caught her mum and her younger brother Pip at the thin end of a long afternoon's barbecuing and beer-drinking in the sunshine, and the children would be yelling down the phone too. Rosie felt sorry for them – she'd only seen Shane, Kelly and Meridian once and they were constantly forced to make conversation with their auntie Rosie, who for all they knew might have a huge wart and grey hair – and it was tricky to chat. But now, with Gerard having his pudding, a large bowl of Frosties, it wasn't a bad time at all.

'Hi, Mum.'

Four, Rosie had recently found herself thinking darkly. Four. That's how many of her friends had met someone and got married during the period she and Gerard had been dating, before they'd even moved in together. And she'd ignored every single alarm bell. She'd been young and care-free when they met, it seemed now (though at the time she'd been desperate to meet someone). Looking at it today, from the wrong side of thirty, the idea that all that time and all that love might not be leading anywhere sometimes gave her vertigo.

Rosie had heard her family all talk about the good life down in Oz, the swimming pools in the back gardens and the lovely weather and the fresh fish. Her mother, whose patience was constantly stretched by Pip's three children, and whose unflattering opinions on Gerard (not Gerard himself, he was perfectly pleasant, but his seeming unwillingness to marry, provide for and impregnate her only daughter, preferably all by last Thursday) she rarely hesitated to share, was always trying to persuade her down under for a year or so, but Rosie loved London. Always had.

She loved its bustling sense of being in the middle of things; its people, all nationalities, hugger-mugger on the crowded streets; theatre and exhibition openings (although she never went to any); great historic monuments (although she never visited them). She had absolutely no desire to give up her life and move halfway around the world to where, she was sure, cleaning old people's bums was much the same and cleaning her nieces' bums for free would be thrown in.

'Darling, I have a proposition for you.'

Angie sounded excited. Rosie groaned mentally.

'I can't work down under, remember? I don't have the qualifications or the points or whatever it is,' she'd said.

'Ha, oh well, who cares about that,' said her mother, as if there was no connection between her dad leaving and her failing half her A levels that year. 'Anyway, it's something else.'

'And I don't want to . . . be a nanny.'

According to comprehensive emails from her mum, Shane was a thug, Kelly was a princess and Meridian was developing an eating disorder at the age of four. And since she'd moved in with Gerard and they'd got a mortgage, Rosie hadn't been able

to save even the tiniest bit of her salary. She couldn't afford the ticket in a million years.

'I don't think so. Mum, I'm thirty-one! I think it's time I stood on my own two feet, don't you?'

'Well, it's not that,' Angie said. 'This is something else. Something quite different. It's not us, darling. It's Lilian.'