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Opening extract from

Say You Love Me, Stevie C

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Published by

Walker Books Ltd

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Methinks I got away with it by swatting said imaginary fly with my hands.

"It can nae kill me," he said. "Now give me a goodbye kiss before I jump in the shower."

Anytime! I thought. And could there be more perfect lips? Just about managed to pull away from them to say, "See you tomorrow."

"Kick-off's at four tomorrow, Boss Lady, and the coach ride from Newcastle takes ages, so it'll be too late for us to meet up by the time I get back. We'll have to leave it till Monday."

Oh no–ooooooooooo! Being without him tonight was bad enough but tomorrow as well just proves what I've always believed: football sucks. Although, must admit there are perks: Netherfield Park Rangers paying for Stephen to stay in this swanky hotel in the Docklands, for instance.

"Unless…" He sighed.

"Unless what?"

"Yer fancy the train ride up there? Then you'll finally get to see me play. *Live*."

"But I *will* be seeing you play live."

He frowned.

"On Sky Sports," I explained, straight-faced.

"Oh … yeah … but…" he stammered, ever Mr Polite. I couldn't resist smiling. "Are you winding me up?" he checked.

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"Of course I am. I'm not *that* thick."

He laughed. "Just think a Sunday game will be perfect for you, cos you don't have to work."

Yep, he's right. My "too busy working at the salon" excuse definitely won't cut it this time.

"My parents and Angus will be there if yer worried about being on your own."

A chance to meet his family and best friend too – now that's BIG. Maybe even the extra kick up the bum I need to walk into the players' lounge and finally deal with being in the same room as my twot-faced ex: Stephen's teammate, Robbie Wilkins. And I will be strong. I will remind the little git that I'm not a gold-digging WAG wannabe like he told Stephen, but a v. ambitious salon mogul. Yeah! Do it, Remy.

"I'll be there," I told him. "Um… Just as long as there are no hiccups at the salon today." #ColdFeet 😐

"Right, better get off to work, Boss Lady. Can't be late and all that."

7.40 p.m.

I'm home. And not knackered but *ker*-knackered (more extreme, near-death level form of tiredness). Had my first horrible customer today. It was in the morning too (not my best time) and it took all my blooming energy to deal with her without use of swear words, or physical abuse. Now OK, something did go wrong with the Tanarama booth

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settings. And, yes, she did step out of it looking like an Oompa-Loompa, but I apologized close to two thousand times and that still wasn't good enough.

"Look at me, my skin's ruined!"

My ex-boss (and owner of Kara's, the salon down the road) used to do my head in – which is why she deserved to be called the Feminazi. But now I at least admire the way she used to deal with unhappy customers. She'd turn on the poshness and say some proper long words that confused people until they just mumbled, "OK," when she offered a free beauty product as compensation. I decided to try that. How hard could it be?

"Don't worry, Miss Weeks. Your skin will be *absolutely*, *fantastically* fine after a few scrubs. And please bear in mind that *technically*, with it being an *automated* spray-tan booth, it isn't actually my fault. However, please take a moisturizer or a nail varnish of your choice to make up for it."

"Is that all?!"

"Um… And I'd also like to offer two Tanarama sessions once the booth is fixed – free of charge of course."

"And a manicure an' all, yeah?" she demanded.

Why oh why do they have that stupid rule that says the customer's always right?

I visualized myself in a parallel universe where it was OK to put my hands around her bright orange neck and squee–eeeze. BLISS.

"Sure, Miss Weeks—"

"Mrs," she corrected.

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"*Mrs* Weeks. I'll throw in a Tah-dah! Magic Manicure as well," I told her, which just happens to be the most expensive one.

Grrr.

Now just want to put on some PJs, chill out on the sofa and veg in front of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*.

7.45 p.m.

Eww! Went to the living room to watch TV, but Mum and Alan were wrapped around each other on the sofa. Think this is highly insensitive considering they know I'm in the house. Yes, I've moved back in and I do talk to them (to be polite), but that doesn't mean I'm over them STABBING DAD IN THE BACK. Besides, they're too old to be acting like that.

Mum asked if I'd spoken to Malibu today and then when I said I hadn't she went off on one about me needing to be a supportive sister. Wanted to tell her that Dad needs support too. It can't be easy adjusting to not seeing us every day. Mum didn't give me a chance though: she was still going on about helping Malibu out.

"You wait till the baby's here. *That*'s when the real problems start," she finished.

Why did she emphasize the "that"? I wondered. *Does she know? But surely Malibu wouldn't have told her.* I decided it was best to be cautious. "Why? What did she say?"

"That she's scared. And she sounded it too. *Very*."

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Hmm. Scared about giving birth or … the results of giving birth, so to speak? As in the baby not looking like the dad it's supposed to look like? Couldn't decide. And yes, I may have blurted out every secret ever told to me, but not this time. No. Way.

"Yeah, OK. I'll call her now," I said to play safe. Then I got out of there, pronto – before they both got lovey-dovey again.

7.50 P.M.

Bloody Nora! Train tickets to Newcastle have gone up sixty pounds since the last time I looked. Would now cost two hundred and twenty quid – could buy two Sneezy-Jet tix to Magaluf for that! Don't think I can afford it.

8 P.M.

"You're just making an excuse," snapped Malibu. Called her to "offer support" but she asked what I was up to, and when I told her about the ticket predicament, she ended up giving me a lecture. Typical. 😐 "You should make the effort. And even more important than that is him *seeing* that you have because, no offence, I don't think you went all out for Robbie. And if you don't make a man feel special, Remy, there are hundreds of other women that will."

Gr–rreat. My big sis was now hinting that it was *my* fault Robbie did the dirty on me. Would normally have dug in

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and argued with her but the phone call wasn't meant to be about my problems (which happen to be teeny compared with hers).

"OK, OK. How are you, anyway? Mum said I should call."

She sighed. "Not good."

"Why, what's happened?"

Had Gary "Goldenballs" discovered that the baby might actually be Lance Wilson's? Or was the guilt of keeping such a big secret getting to her, causing sleepless nights, panic attacks, stress? No.

"I need a vajazzle," Malibu said.

"A *what*?"

"A VJ. I can't tell you how ugly I feel carrying around an extra stone and a half. So I thought I'd pop into yours and pamper myself by snazzing up downstairs."

"No way," I told her.

"Why?"

I pointed out that she was almost eight months pregnant, so would be v. inappropriate.

And she said that I was living in the Dark Ages and I'd be surprised by what pregnant women got up to nowadays.

A majorly gross image of her and Goldenballs flashed into my head. *Surely they can't still be at it – not in her condition?*

"I'm gonna be sick in my mouth now," I told her. But she still didn't change the subject.

"I went to watch Gary play today, and the girls were

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saying that you can't afford to let yourself go – even when you're pregnant. The WAG wannabes are actually more dangerous then."

"Yeah, well somehow I don't think they mean you need to decorate your privates with crystals."

"Come on, Rem. Gary's so good to me – I just want to repay him with a nice surprise. Ple–eeeeeease. You owe me anyway."

"For?"

"Neglect."

She had a point. Have been a pretty useless sister these past three weeks since the salon opened.

"And it's my birthday next week. You can make it an early prezzie."

Mal's twenty-five on 1 March.

"Pretty purlease?"

"Oh … OK then. I'll *think* about it," I groaned.

"Perfect. Speak tomorrow. Oh, and Rem?"

"Yes?"

"Check out the Zoe Westwick column in *Hey There!*"

"*Who?*"

"Zoe Westwick – the relationship guru. I think you could do with some tips."

Oh, the irony. 😐

8.05 P.M.

Newcastle… Still can't decide whether to go or not.

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Reasons to go:

1. Will meet Stephen's parents.
2. Will meet his best friend Angus.
3. Making such a big effort will probably squash any bad feelings about our ickle argument last night.

Such a stupid argument too. All because I accused him of looking at a barmaid's bum.

"She's got a Post-it note on it that says 'private property'," he'd explained.

Instead of checking whether it was true, I'd snapped, "Well that *proves* you were looking at her bum."

"Boss Lady, I think you need an ice-cold can of Chill-ade."

Trust issues – yet another thing I can blame Robbie Wilkins for. 😐

Reasons not to go:

1. Robbie – OF COURSE.

Thing is, not only will I have to deal with Robbie – I reckon my name's dirt with most of the people at Netherfield Park now, especially with the WAGs. They can be right bitches.

Oh no, I can hear Mum and Alan giggling. Eww! Now Mum's telling him to stop because she's ticklish!

Dear God, please let me win the lottery so I can buy a house and move out!

"Come on, baby-wayby, you know you love it!"

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Ugh! That's it. Phoning my besties to see if they're free tonight – have to escape the Born-Again Teenagers. Pronto!

8.10 P.M.

Called Kellie but she's going to the cinema with her boyfriend, Jack. She said I could come too but they're worse than the Born-Again Teenagers, and without Stephen I'd feel v. awkward. Will now phone James.

8.15 P.M.

"Hello–oo, what you doing tonight?" I asked James.

"Hey hon. One of my workmates is having a party. It's going to be fierce."

"Where?"

"Shoreditch."

"Can I come?"

"I take it Stephen isn't around then," he replied in a sarky tone.

"Um … no, he isn't actually. Had to go to Newcastle for the game tomorrow. Why?"

"Because you wouldn't be wanting to come out if he was."

"Oi! Don't begrudge me the honeymoon period. Besides, I haven't been that bad."

"No. You've been worse than bad. But it's OK. I'll still be here to pick up the pieces."

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James has been working at Cutz hair salon in Shoreditch for two weeks and they seem to be adding bitchiness to his wage packet.

"The pieces?! There won't be any *pieces* – he's nothing like Robbie."

"We hope."

Grrr.

"Look, can I come to the party – yes or no?"

"Of course you can. Then you can meet Rupert." His voice definitely lifted.

"Oooh, who's Rupert?"

"My new boyfriend. He just doesn't know it yet. In fact, I'm pretty sure he doesn't know I exist!" We both laughed.

"And what does Rupert do then?"

"That's the best bit – he works at Villa House."

I have no idea what Villa House is so I just said, "Wow. Cool. See you later."

8.20 P.M.

It'll be hard to talk properly once I'm out with James, so thought I'd better phone Stephen and make a decision.

"Hey Boss Lady, I was just about to call you."

"Aha! Great minds think alike."

"Aye. They do. Now, are yer coming to Newcastle?"

"Um…"

"It's OK if yer can't. I mean I want yer to but … I don't want yer to feel pressurized."

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"Oh no. It's no pressure," I pretended.

"Good. Because if you can't come, Angus will use your ticket to bring his sister – but only if yer can't make it."

Sister? Aka another woman willing to fill my shoes, just like Malibu predicted. "You've never mentioned that Angus has a sister."

"Aye. He has two."

Gr–rreat. What was he going to say next: "And they're both beautiful"?!

"And do both sisters want to go?"

"No. Just Beth."

"Oh. *Be–eeth*."

"Aye. She's the younger one."

Well, hopefully that means she's sixty-three, I thought. "Really? How old is she?"

"Twelve."

Yippee! Twelve equals no threat, and no threat equals no need for me to go to Newcastle, and no need to see Robbie and the WAGs!

"Ahhh. Twelve," I gushed.

"Aye. She's a sweet wee thing."

"Yes. Well… In that case, she's probably really looking forward to it. And I'd feel bad if she missed out, so…" I sighed. "Let her go instead."

"You sure?" Stephen sounded surprised. "I thought you really wanted to come."

"Oh, I do! But … I'd feel terrible knowing I'd spoilt Beth's chance to go. Especially when I can see your next game."

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"Oh." He sounded surprised again. "Aren't Saturdays still a problem?"

"Saturdays? Yes. Of course. Big problem. Well, they have been up until now, that is, but the beauticians are settling in well, so I'm sure I'll be able to leave the salon in their hands… Soon… In the very near future."

"Right."

He sounded disappointed. Feel bad now. ☹

9.05 P.M.

Oh yes–ss, methinks James will be v. impressed when he sees me. Tonight I'm rocking the sexy-chic look and I copied almost everything *Flair* mag said: tight, sparkly dress. Check! (Mine has gold sequins.) High-heeled pumps. Check! (Also gold.) Stylish accessories. Check! (Chainmail earrings bought using Topshop staff discount – thank you, Kel!) Glamorous hair. Double-check! (Hot-brushed and big and bouncy – like Cheryl Cole in that ad.)

Shoreditch, here I come!

3 a.m.

I blooming hate Shoreditch! AND James has proper pissed me off tonight. He should have told me that place isn't for normal people like me. It's for arty-farty types. Attention-seekers. Knobheads (in Rupert's case). I swear Lady Gaga could walk down Shoreditch High Street in

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her meat dress and nobody would bat an eyelid.

Should have realized something was wrong as soon as James opened his front door. He usually compliments my clothes or hair, so I thought he'd be all over my sexy-chic look. But all he did was groan, "What took you so long?"

Another clue was what he was wearing. He's kissed goodbye to Hollister T-shirts and loose-fit Levi's; and said hello to skinny jeans, patent shoes, a black bowtie (v. random) and a brown leather jacket that looked like it'd gone ten rounds with David Haye. Even worse, it was throwing out one hell of a pong – not a sweaty one but an old "been in a dusty cupboard for ten years" type of smell. WTF?!

Didn't want to hurt his feelings when he asked whether I liked it so I just mumbled, "Yeah."

"Thanks. It's vintage," he replied, looking pleased with himself.

Yeah, I smelt that. "Great," I said.

But then he still didn't mention my sexy-chic look. 😐

When the bus hit Shoreditch High Street, I realized why.

"*What* is he wearing?" I pointed at a guy in a multi-coloured jumpsuit, thinking James would laugh.

"I think he looks fab. It's all about individuality in Shoreditch. Trying to reflect your personality instead of following whatever style *Flair* says you should be wearing this week."

Ouch.

"But you used to love *Flair*," I told him.

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"Yeah," he replied. "And then I grew up."

See what I mean about the bitchiness?

The bar was called Chill Zone and by the time we got there, we'd passed enough "individuals" to make me realize that my outfit was a huge mistake.

"Why didn't you say?" I complained to James. "I feel so out of place."

"We were running late as it was. Besides, it's not like you could have gone home, changed and made it better. You don't have anything—" He stopped himself.

"Anything what?" I pressed.

"Anything 'Shoreditch' anyway."

No. Nothing "Sho–ooreditch". Not like Rainbow, the girl in charge of the guestlist, who was wearing enormous fake eyelashes, a Sixties-style mini dress and a white fur cape. If we'd been anywhere else, I would have thought she was in fancy dress. Austin Powers' assistant maybe?

"What a fabulous outfit, dahling," James told her, over-pronouncing his words like he was talking to a nan who's hard of hearing.

"Thanks," Rainbow replied. "It's vintage."

I just about managed to stop myself from pointing out, "What you REALLY mean is *second-hand*."

Inside, Chill Zone was packed with Shoreditch types rocking the Shoreditch look, and Rupert was no exception. He was wearing green skinny jeans, a checked shirt, purple Dr. Martens and exactly the same leather jacket that James had on.

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"Hello dahling," he said to James. Then he frowned at me as though I were some kind of alien species – a "big-haired sequin" maybe? – before pecking James on both cheeks. *Mwah*, *mwah*.

"This is Rupert," James announced with a big grin. "And you're going to get us into Villa House – aren't you, Rupert?"

"If you play your cards right," Rupert flirted back.

"And this is Remy. You know, the friend I told you I used to go to college with."

Rupert gave me a David Attenborough look again – like he was thinking, *Is she even from this planet?*

"Did James do your hair?" he asked when he'd finished his inspection.

"No. No, she did it herself," James quickly cut in.

Rupert's nose creased like a dog had laid one on his top lip. "Thought as much," he said, then walked off.

Didn't want it to bother me, but five minutes later I went to the toilet and patted my hair down – at least then it was only ten centimetres bigger than everyone else's. Couldn't find James when I came back. He'd gone off to the toilets with Rupert and they both came back with saucepan-sized pupils, giggling. *roll eyes*

Thankfully, Rupert kept his distance after that. He was Mr Popular, flitting between different groups. James stayed with me, in body anyway, but his eyes always followed Rupert everywhere. It got on my nerves at first – made me wonder whether he regretted bringing me. But

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it's surprising how little things matter after a few mojitos (definitely my new favourite drink)! And I can handle it as well. Only feel a teensy-weensy bit tipsy and I must have had at least six of them. ☺

Sunday 22 February – 9.25 a.m.

Ughhhh! My head! And why am I lying in bed fully clothed, with a face full of make-up? What a skank!

9.30 a.m.

Need aspirin, paracetamol, tranquillizers, ibuprofen, ANYTHING. Kitchen cupboard – BE PREPARED.

9.35 a.m.

"Gordon Bennet, looks like someone had a good night, buddy," Alan joked when I staggered into the kitchen. All those years in Australia means that he constantly slips from an Aussie to a Cockney accent in one sentence. It makes me smile but only on the inside – no way am I going to let him see the corners of my mouth turned up.

"Fancy some bacon and eggs?" he asked.

Boy, would I have killed for some bacon and eggs.

"No thanks," I groaned because my loyalty remains with Dad. (Just wish Alan would stop trying to be so flipping nice.)

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