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Opening extract from

Chocolate Box Girls: Sweet Honey

Written by

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Dear Honey,

If you're reading this note you are probably at the departure gate or maybe actually up in the clouds already, on the way to Australia. It's just to say some of the things I couldn't say out loud. I didn't want to cry, and I didn't want us to argue. So here goes.

A. You may be the most annoying big sister in the world, but I am going to miss you.

B. I know it's not forever but I think you are making a BIG mistake. It is bad enough having a dad on the other side of the planet without losing your sister too.

C. Things won't be the same without you. (They will probably be a lot quieter, but I don't care, I still wish you weren't going.)

Your favourite Sister,
Coco xxx

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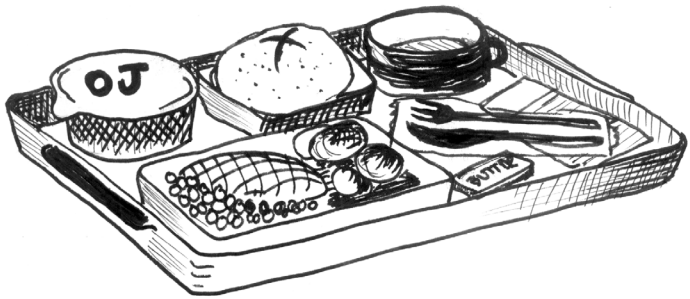

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I smile and fold the note neatly, putting it back into the pocket of my shoulder bag. My little sister is crazy, and I will miss her too, but she knows as well as I do that my days at Tanglewood are over. I've messed up one time too many. What can I say? Getting a friend to hack into the school computer system to fake my grades and school reports was not my best move, and getting caught and expelled kind of sealed the deal.

I needed a one-way ticket out of there, and Dad stepped up to the mark and provided me with one – a ticket to Australia, a new start, a way out of the mess my life has been lately. Who wouldn't have said yes?

It takes twenty-three hours to fly from London Heathrow to Sydney, and that is a very long time to be stuck in cattle-class on a plane. I eat the weird, pre-packed dinner

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on a tray and ask for a glass of wine to go with it, but the stewardess just rolls her eyes and hands me an orange juice. Everything tastes of sawdust anyway, so I don't much care. We stop off in Singapore for the plane to refuel, but apart from a brief walk around the airport I don't get to actually see anything of the place. And then we're back on the plane and the other passengers yawn and tip their seats back and huddle down under thin fleece blankets with funny little eye-masks on, and the lights go down on life as I know it.

I am too excited to sleep. Australia – land of sunshine, surf, opportunities! I take out a pocket sketchbook and doodle pictures of myself flying through the stars, wearing a sundress and feathered wings and my vintage high-heeled boots.

I put on my headphones and watch two movies in a row; then I flick on my overhead light and read two magazines. Like I said, it's a long flight. I go to the bathroom and walk up and down the aisle for exercise a few times like they tell you to do on long-haul flights, but the eye-rolly stewardess gives me a very sour look, so I sit down again and try to be patient.

Maybe I actually do fall asleep, for a minute or two at least, because the next thing I know, the lights snap on again

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and the sky outside is pink with the promise of dawn. It's almost morning, Sydney time. The stewardess hands me a sawdust-flavoured, shrink-wrapped breakfast but I am so excited I can't eat a thing, and then we are buckling up the seat belts ready for landing. Finally.

When I walk out on to those aeroplane steps and take my first ever look at a Sydney daybreak, I am so brimful of happiness I think I might burst.

Dad is waiting for me at Arrivals, tanned and smiling, effortlessly cool in a grey linen suit. He has to be forty, easily, but he doesn't look it. As always, he draws a few admiring glances from women of a certain age, but Dad's grin is all for me. I run towards him, pulling my wheely suitcase behind me, and he scoops me up in a big bear hug, laughing.

'How's my best girl?' he asks, and I am so happy I could burst. I've waited a very long time to hear those words.

'Breakfast?' he suggests, swinging up my heavy suitcase as if it weighs nothing. 'Those flights are a killer and plane food is the pits. Let's get you something decent!'

Having eaten almost nothing on the plane, I am suddenly starving. I follow Dad into the leafy enclosure of an upmarket

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airport restaurant, and he orders for both of us, something fancy with poached eggs and hollandaise sauce, freshly squeezed orange juice, croissants, jam.

'So,' he says, leaning back as the waitress hurries off with our order. 'Here we go. A new start in Australia! What's going on, Honey Tanberry?'

I raise my chin. I have messed up, I know it. I have made so many mistakes it's hard to know where to begin. It started with me skipping school, telling lies, staying out all night with a fairground boy called Kes and his unsuitable friends. Mum was majorly upset about that, and I was glad. Yes, Kes was older than me; yes, he was trouble. So what? I happen to like trouble.

I am good at it too. You could say I have trouble down to a fine art. I lied, I cheated, I stopped studying. Then came the bit I mentioned, about persuading a friend to hack the school computer system and 'adjust' my grades. We got found out. I ended up with social services on my case, with Mum crying and my sisters yelling and my stupid stepdad Paddy raking a hand through his hair and looking at me sadly as if I was the one who pulled our happy family to bits, and not him.

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Yeah, well, we all know that isn't how it happened.

It doesn't matter because in the end I've got what I wanted – the fresh start to beat them all. A new life, with Dad, in Australia.

I have done my research. I know that Australia is beautiful, sunshiny, unspoilt. It's the perfect place for new beginnings. It's also the place where Britain once shipped its convicts, long ago.

I reckon I will fit right in.

'I take it you were struggling, living with your mum?' Dad says, sipping a latte. 'Not all happy families, huh?'

'We haven't been a family for ages,' I tell him flatly. 'Not since you left.'

Dad just laughs, but it's true. He knows I don't blame him – it's what happened afterwards that did the damage.

When Dad left, that whole family thing slipped through our fingers and shattered like glass. We tried to pick up the pieces, put them together again, but we just couldn't. The only one who could have done it was Dad, and before he got the chance Paddy pitched up with his hateful, boyfriend-stealing daughter Cherry and that was that. Dad took a transfer out to Australia and my dream that

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he'd come back to us some day bit the dust big style. One broken family, no longer any hope for repairs.

'Life moves on,' Dad says lightly. 'I know I couldn't always be there for you. I can see you've found it tough, these last few years.'

'Just a bit.'

It's not like I didn't try my best – I threw confetti at the wedding, smiled at Paddy across the breakfast table, resisted the urge to slap Cherry's lying, cheating face. I pretended it was all OK, but it wasn't, and sooner or later I knew the game of let's pretend would fall apart.

It all blew up, and things were looking pretty bad – then Dad chucked me a lifeline and here I am, shipped out to Australia, a modern-day convict girl. I will be attending a private school that sounds like a cross between bad-girl boot camp and hippy-dippy wholemeal heaven, with counselling and one-to-one support to help me pass a handful of exams after all.

'Things will be better here,' Dad says. 'A fresh start. You're my girl, Honey – I know you can make a go of it, turn things around. Right?'

'Right!' I agree.

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Well, maybe.

I am just happy to be here, with a clean slate and a last, last chance to get my life on track. I am determined to make it work. Call me cynical, but sometimes it is easier to walk away from a messed-up life than to stick around and patch things up. It doesn't mean I don't love my mum and sisters – I do. I just can't be a part of the new-look family they've put together.

Fresh starts . . . Dad has always been good at those, and I plan to be too.

'You're a lot like me, you know, Honey,' Dad tells me between mouthfuls of breakfast. 'I was a bit of a rebel in my time. I had a few ups and downs, a few changes of school before I settled. We're alike, you and I.'

I smile. I want to be like Dad – who wouldn't? He is dramatic, confident, charismatic. He has this magic about him – when he looks at you, you feel like you're the only person in the whole wide world. You feel special, chosen, golden.

I felt this way all the time when I was a kid – I was Dad's favourite. Then he left, and everything turned to dust. Without Dad, everything at Tanglewood was cold and empty and hollow.

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It will be different here.

Dad is telling me about the house, the pool, the nearby beach. He is explaining how Sydney is the most beautiful city he knows, how he will help me explore it, how I will learn to love it too.

I almost miss it when Dad mentions, ever so casually, that it won't be just me and him in the fancy beachside bungalow with the outdoor pool. It will be me, him and his girlfriend, Emma. My ears buzz and for a moment everything seems foggy, cold. It could be jet lag, but I don't think so. Through the fog, Dad's words worm themselves into my brain.

'Emma's lovely,' he says carelessly. 'You'll get along great!'

Emma. The name rings a bell, but I think it's just the situation that's familiar. Disappointment curdles in my belly, sharp and sour. I have spent years without my dad, and I really, really don't want to share him now.

It looks as if I have flown halfway round the world to escape an annoying stepdad, only to have acquired some kind of stepmum.

That was never part of the plan.

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Cherry Costello
<cherryblossomgirl@chocolatebox.co.uk>
to me ✉

Hope you've landed safely. It's weird, the house feels all empty and wrong without you. We don't always see eye to eye, Honey, but I honestly never wanted us to be enemies. I know you feel that me and Dad don't belong at Tanglewood, but if you'd just give us a chance you might change your mind. I am genuinely sorry for what happened with Shay, you know that. I hope we can be friends one day. Cherry xxx

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