

**FOOD CHAIN**

by

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Novella, short story and poem anthology

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## FOOD CHAIN

‘Positive? How can it be positive?’

Meet Alyssa Abbott, the not-so-proud owner of the guiltiest of pregnancy testing sticks.

Oops!

Up until this harrowing moment, Alyssa had been (sort of) happy in her teenage life. She had a job, a checkout girl at the local supermarket. She also had money. Well, not a lot more than a monthly pittance of minimum wage, but enough to (sort of) live on. After paying bed and board to her parents, her remaining spends were blown on the usual suspects; clothes, make-up and (most importantly) getting wrecked at the weekend. Oh, come on, she was still young. It was practically illegal for somebody her age not to have fun-fun-fun, and instead be sensible with finances. After all, saving money was a pastime for older people. Much, much older people. Now, what else? Ah, yes, her love life was a total car crash. Well, actually, make that a multiple motorway pile-up. But all in all, she could pretty much high-five everything else connected with her youthful existence. However... it now looked as though her (mostly) high-fiveable existence was about to change. Drastically. Like, totally beyond recognition.

Fuck.

‘What were you thinking, not telling him to use a condom?’

This particular question, albeit somewhat parent-like and finger-waggly in its tone, had fallen out of the ever-lipsticked mouth of work colleague Emma Smith, twenty-one years of age; by weekday, a fellow supermarket checkout operator, by weekend, a crazy party animal. Nobody knew for sure what this girl truly looked like in the natural sense, not even Alyssa, for her face was permanently plastered with an estimated five millimetre thickness of foundation. She wasn't exactly Alyssa's bestie (she didn't actually have a best friend as

such), but Emma was the only person she could trust... or hoped she could trust, especially in the midst of such a sensitive and shocking revelation.

‘I always make sure my shag slips on a fun balloon,’ continued Emma, a tad too annoying in her sustained level-headed guise, rare for her. ‘No protection on that erection means strictly no entry into paradise, baby.’

Alyssa scowled, wondering if Miss Smith of strictly fun balloon fame had been her best choice of confidant. ‘Yeah, thanks for that handy little snippet of wisdom, Emma.’ Tone, sarcastic. Variety, blatant. ‘Four words for you. Stable door. Horse. Bolted.’

‘#justsaying, babes.’ Emma called everybody babes. Men. Women. Animals. And on occasion, even inanimate objects.

The two girls stood together in the staff toilets of the supermarket, with Emma performing a make-up retouch, her ditzy reflection pouting back at her from the communal mirror that watched over a trio of wash basins. Not exactly the greatest of locations to discuss the possible conception of a new human addition to this world, granted, but it certainly beat avoiding the ever-watching, ever-listening eyes and ears of the shop floor. Gossip in this place had a nasty habit of spreading like a code-red epidemic. Therefore, the utmost discretion was paramount.

Alyssa swapped her scowl for a befuddled grimace. ‘I don’t understand. It only happened the once.’

This somewhat flimsy line of defence was indeed correct. One time only. A quick shag, nothing more, nothing less, with quick being the operative word. The dirty deed had only lasted five minutes at the most. Five bloody minutes. A pathetic timescale that could only be achieved by an equally pathetic man... who in turn would surely produce equally pathetic sperm cells incapable of getting the job done, right? So how could it be positive?

It. Just. Didn’t. Make. Sense.

In response, Emma paused the retouch and threw her friend a sympathetic look. ‘Once was obviously enough, babes.’

Suddenly locked in rigid denial mode, Alyssa proceeded to spit out three thousand words a minute. ‘No, no, no, this isn’t real, it can’t be happening. I know women who have tried and tried and tried for a baby for months and months and months, sometimes even years without success. Conception doesn’t happen overnight. Everybody knows that. It requires multiple attempts.’ Yes, surely that was how it worked. Sex session after sex session after sex session after sex session, a brief rest, a quick cigarette (or a vape if trying to cut down/give up), or his and hers cups of tea if non-smokers, then back to it, ooh, ahh, grunt, grunt, huff, puff, cue the messy climax, rinse and repeat. ‘It’s all about cycles, body temperature, the exact moment of ovulation. So how can it be frigging positive?’

Alyssa stared at Emma. Emma stared at Alyssa. For a bloated moment, an unsure, discomfited silence cocooned the duo.

Emma then broke the hush by asking, ‘Are you planning on telling the father?’

‘I might not even be pregnant.’ Alyssa indicated to the stick of doom. ‘These things are never 100% accurate. Nothing is. It could be a glitch. A malfunction. Or maybe I’ve caught a cold or a virus or something that’s affecting my pee. Or... or...’

The look on Emma’s face made it perfectly clear that she didn’t agree with any of Alyssa’s scattergun theories. The foundation-faced colleague cast her eyes upon the cardboard packaging, formerly home to the pregnancy testing stick, and gave the printed text a quick once-over. ‘Alyssa, it says here it’s 99% accurate.’

Even though such an unnerving revelation threatened to kick the could-be-pregnant teenager hard between the legs, Alyssa’s denial opted to stick around a little longer. ‘Well, there you go. I could easily be a member of the 1% club.’ The aforementioned denial then changed its mind, extending a middle finger before pissing off out of it. As a result, the also-

aforementioned could-be-pregnant teenager witnessed her optimism taking a sudden nosedive. ‘Oh, God, what if it’s right? What if I am pregnant?’ Her eyes darted in all directions, as if searching for answers floating around in the surrounding air. ‘I can’t have a baby. Not now. I’m way too young. I’ve got my whole life ahead of me.’

Again, there came a trading of awkward stares.

Then Emma asked, ‘Does he have a name?’

Alyssa threw across a perplexed double take. ‘A name? It won’t even be a proper foetus yet.’ She jabbed a stiff index finger in the direction of her abdomen. ‘Collection of cells o’clock.’

‘No, I meant him. That guy you were seeing. Your mystery lover. Is it his?’

Miss Abbott’s fidgety mind turned to the male who had supplied the sperm that may or may not have been successful in cracking her egg. He had to be the (potential) father, surely. She was no slut, she hadn’t slept with anybody else, not in a long time. And... hold on a minute. What did Emma call him? Her mystery lover? Hardly. Mystery, yes, for his identity had remained Alyssa’s best kept secret. She hadn’t told a soul. Not even Emma. The whole sorry affair (from the guy’s initial stint of wooing, up until their five minute sex session) had been a lame case of, ‘Let’s make it our secret, Alyssa. Between us two only. Nobody else needs to know.’ But lover? Hah, no way. Yuck and double yuck!

‘Yes, of course it’s his. I’m no sleep-arounder.’ A last-ditch bout of optimism then raised a hand. ‘That’s if I am pregnant. There’s still a chance it could turn out to be a false alarm.’

Emma offered across the type of sigh that could only mean one thing. She thought it was highly likely that Alyssa was “with child.” Alyssa also thought it was highly likely that she was “with child.” However, admitting her “with child” problem was another story altogether, especially as the 1% chance of being “without child” was still in the running.

‘If you do turn out to be preggers, babes, you’ll need to tell him.’

Sure, agreed, fair enough, the father did indeed have a right to know. Ah, but would he believe her? Hah, yeah, right, she seriously doubted it. His view on modern girls was that they slept around, the lot of them, weekend upon weekend (and maybe even on a “school” night if feeling particularly horny), drinking like fish, wearing next to nothing, wobbling on their killer heels and almost toppling over, asking for it, begging for it, opening their legs for anybody willing to show them the right attention. In other words, a debauched collective of cock-hungry sluts.

Hmm, was the grim task of informing the man of his newfound parental status high up on her to-do list? No, not really. And knowing the guy in question, was there seriously any point in sharing the news? Again, no, not really. Shit, of all people, why did it have to be him?

‘Is this man daddy material?’ asked Emma, nudging Alyssa away from her own personal black cloud of worry.

An immediate reply, zero hesitation. ‘As frigging if.’

‘Do you love him?’

Alyssa almost choked on such a dumb query. ‘As frigging double if.’

Okay, so once upon a time, she’d fancied the pants off the guy. But not any more. Not since the pants had actually come off, not since he’d got what he wanted, not since he’d treated her body like nothing more than an empty vessel with a convenient hole in which to blow his load. No emotion, no shared experience, nothing for her, everything for him. Never before had she felt so used, so dirty, so... worthless. It certainly hadn’t been the ideal sexual coupling she’d anticipated, that’s for sure.

‘What do you think he’ll have to say about a baby on the way?’ came Emma’s latest query.

‘There might not even be a baby.’ Yes, denial had decided to make a return appearance and now stood firm, refusing to budge.



‘But what if there is?’

More staring. More silence.

Denial faltered.

Denial fell.

‘God knows.’

Questions on postcards cascaded into her aching brain. Would he stand by mother and child? Would he put his hand in his pocket? Would he wave a magic wand and make everything all right? Hah, on all three counts, zero chance of that.

Meanwhile, in the world outside of Alyssa’s anxious thoughts, Emma said, ‘Is there any chance of you two... um... you know...’

Alyssa screwed up her face. ‘Shagging again? Yeah, right, when Hell freezes over.’

‘No, I meant is there even the slightest possibility that you two could make this work?’

Alyssa snorted. Loudly. ‘Make this work? How? We’re not even an item. We never were.’ A long-trailing sigh escaped through her downturned lips. ‘We’ve never been anything really. We had sex. Once. That’s it. Our relationship history in a nutshell. Oh, and he’s already made it perfectly clear that our one-off shag didn’t mean anything to him.’ Alyssa offered a huff. A loud huff. Louder than her recent snort. ‘Wanker is too good a word for that guy.’ Next, she jabbed a thumb at her self-pitying self. ‘And idiot is too good a word for this girl.’

‘Oh, babes, don’t be so hard on yourself.’

‘Why not? I deserve it. I’m an idiot with a capital I. No, no, more than an idiot. I’m a complete twat.’ The ice-cold hand of grim reality thought the time was right to slap her in the face. ‘Oh, God, what will my parents say when I offload the news? They’ll go totally mental. What will my friends think? I’ll be branded a slut.’

‘I won’t call you a slut,’ piped up Emma.

‘Everybody else will. And what about my job? There’s no way Benson will keep me on, not once the dreaded bump reaches whale-like proportions.’

Alyssa gawped once more at the pregnancy testing stick in her trembling hand. Nothing had changed. The result was the same. Positive. Shit. What the frigging hell was she supposed to do now? Oh, God, she had to face facts, her life as she knew it was trashed.

Then oh, a fresh thought occurred to the girl, a flicker of hope. ‘Hey, what if I’ve got things mixed up? Two lines might mean negative.’ A smile managed to break through the grey cloud cover. ‘I could be worrying over nothing.’

However, one quick check of the testing stick, followed by a refresh-read of the accompanying instruction sheet later, her worst fears were well and truly confirmed.

One line, not pregnant. Two lines... doomed!

Smile lost.

Flicker of hope extinguished.

Oh, God, it was official.

Eighteen-year-old Alyssa Abbott was pregnant.

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‘Scream, scream, scream, kid, that’s all you ever do!’

Okay, so nineteen-year-old Alyssa didn’t mean to display such fiery resent towards her offspring, but baby Oscar certainly knew how to try his mother’s patience.

Alyssa had felt such wondrous delight when the beaming midwife first placed the tiny, gurgling bundle of joy into her waiting arms. Four months down the line, however, her initial enchantment was nothing more than a fading memory. The endless sleepless nights, the constant nappy trade of piccalilli yellow to fresh white, not to mention the perpetual

preparation of formula milk at piss-off o'clock, had put paid to any extended maternal bliss. Sure, on several occasions, she'd attempted breastfeeding, if only to appease her nagging mother, but fucking hell, sod that for a laugh, her poor nipples were red raw, cracked to buggery and ready to drop off, painful or what?

Out poked Alyssa's head from beneath the duvet. She raised a hand to shade her groggy eyes from fingers of dazzling morning light intent on stabbing and slashing their way like the blade of a crazed cokehead through the gaps in the ill-fitting curtains. Why the frigging hell was her little boy screaming blue murder? Throughout the longest of nights, he'd been fed, he'd been winded, he'd been changed, he'd been cuddled, he'd been changed again, what more did he want?

Hmm, maybe he was cold. It was hardly surprising. This shithole of a flat was a far cry from des-res status with its uncarpeted floorboards, rattling window frames and mould-infested walls. Her humble abode also boasted the added anti-bonus of the acrid stench of infant's piss, shit and vomit, fused with Alyssa's own proverbial blood, sweat and tears. What was that saying again? Home is where the heart is? Huh, the knobhead who coined that particular nugget of wisdom could frigging jog on.

Alyssa's one-bedroom hovel was emergency accommodation, the type of which was typically allocated to whom those snobby housing officers classified as lowly single mother scum-suckers and their illegitimate sprogs. Cheeky bastards, placing Alyssa herself in the same category as those lowlife chavs. But then again, a lone parent with no future was exactly the role she currently played in the continuing movie of life itself, oh, the shame of it all. And to think, there were hoards of naïve young girls out there, all desperate to accidentally on purpose fall pregnant in order to claim the coveted badge of singlemotherdom and bag themselves a free social housing property of their own, not realising they'd be

ruining their lives in the process. Idiotic twats. Be careful what you wish for, freeloading slappers.

The girl had never intended to become a member of the With Child, No Father In Sight Club. From leaving school, right up until her solo expedition into the ominous jungle of motherhood, Alyssa had held down a job. Not exactly her career of choice, granted, but she'd always planned to better herself, to climb the ladder, to make a difference, to finally become somebody. Huh, no chance of that now. Right from the moment the pregnancy test pointed and laughed at the girl with its positive result, the poor lass knew she was doomed to a life of mindless drudgery. Oh, and her situation wasn't exactly improved by the owner of the guilty sperm turning down the starring role of Daddy. Argh, one dickhead blunder had left the lass skint, lonely and destitute.

Alyssa Abbott, welcome to the bottom of the frigging food chain.

It was then when the tiny cot-dweller let out an almighty screech, arms thrashing, fists punching, legs kicking, its last-ditch attempt at grabbing the limelight.

'Look, Mum, this is an opportune time for me to lay down the law,' she could imagine Oscar saying if babies could talk. 'I'm the boss, you're my servant, that's the way it is, so you'd better get used to it. Oh, and while we're on the subject, don't you go thinking you've only got eighteen years of this hell. I'm not planning on moving out until I'm at least forty. So there! Yah-boo to you!'

'All right, all right, you win,' Alyssa hissed as the white-hot fires of contempt raged within her exhausted body. 'Just like you always do.'

Tearing herself free from the cosy warmth of her duvet, she scooped the infant in her arms. At once, his piercing screech surrendered to a mere gurgle of contentment. Huh, more like one-upmanship. Smart kid.

Ambling over to the window, she flung open the curtains, expecting the sunlight that had recently scorched her retinas to shoo away the gloom. But no. The promise of a pleasant spring day was nowhere to be found, as if taunting her, teasing her, hiding behind the grey and decaying towers of metropolis, skulking in the sullen shadows of a city turned sour.

The world outside her tenth-floor window was nothing more than a bleak and towering forest of concrete and glass, stretching out into the murky distance. Calming lawns of lush green had no place in this neighbourhood. Around these parts, grass was a dirty word. Except of course the type cut with baccy, rolled up and smoked.

Baby in transit, Alyssa made her way into the kitchen. She flicked on the kettle and poured herself the last remaining contents of a box of cereal. Oh, great. Barely enough flakes to cover the bottom of the bowl. But better than a kick up the arse, she supposed. Her next port of call was the fridge. Nothing but a lone carton of milk graced its stark interior. Well, that and a previously prepared bottle for the baby. It was hardly worth having the bloody thing on. Waste of electricity. As it was, the card meter was practically running on empty.

She poured the milk over her breakfast. A thick gloop of curdled mess ruined her plans.

‘Shit.’

Cereal binned, alternative foodstuff required.

Seeking sustenance in any shape or form, Alyssa searched each cupboard in turn. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Old Mother Hubbard sprang to mind. Ah, well, look on the bright side, she was planning on losing some weight anyway. The girl wasn't exactly fat, far from it, but following the pregnancy, Alyssa and her original size 10 waistline had yet to make an amicable reunion. Having fuck all food in the place was the ideal boost she needed to get her teeth into a strict dietary regime.

Alyssa then thought it best to check the contents of the tub of formula milk. Hmm, enough feeds for a day or two. But after that, who knows what she'd do? Bollocks. Next week's benefits payment seemed like a hundred million years away.

The kettle came to the boil and flicked off. She placed a changing mat on the floor and lay her gurgling son upon it. Yay, no screaming. Things were looking up. Enjoying the rare bout of silence, the girl prepared herself a coffee. That's when she spotted it taking pride of place in the almost naked vegetable rack. One lonely onion. Food. Sort of.

Oh, God, could she? Really?

Yes.

The initial bite of the peeled onion didn't taste too bad. Then came the heat. Shit, umpteen coffee gulps required.

Oh, why had she let herself get like this? She didn't consider herself anything like modern life's army of professional scroungers who thought the world owed them a living, the lazy bastards, all shying away from any form of work and reaping the benefits, huh, in more ways than one. Yet here she was, living day by day, waiting for the next frigging handout. Oh, God, something had to be done about her current predicament. She needed money and she needed it pronto. No doubt about it, now was the time to devise a method of fixing her long list of fuck-ups.

She already had her first plan of action ready to roll out.

What was it? Simple.

Begging for her old job back.

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When it worked, the lift was considered by all who resided in the upper floors of the towerblock as a godsend. However, the majority of the time saw the frigging contraption out of order. Ten flights of stairs, or even more for the unlucky souls who lived up in the “penthouse” levels, were difficult to navigate with a buggy or pram in one arm, a child in the other. God knows how the fat-fucker mothers of football team numbers of whinging shits managed the task. Needless to say, there were a fair few of them in this neighbourhood.

The lift door swished open. Oh, good. Full working order. Alyssa wheeled Oscar’s pram inside and found the somewhat cramped and claustrophobic metal cube occupied by Donk, twenty-two years of age, the block’s resident walking cliché, sporting a baseball cap turned sideways and baggy jeans slung low to almost knee level. To her disgust, he was peeing in the corner.

‘Oi, Donk, do you mind?’

Donk gave the snake a shake, zipped himself up and turned to face her. ‘What’s it to you?’ he retorted in the adopted Jafrican twang that never sounded right with a white boy such as himself, and quite frankly made him look like a twat.

Alyssa indicated to her child. ‘I don’t want my son seeing you doing that.’

He peered at the baby, then back at the mother. ‘The kid’s asleep.’

Knowing it was a lost cause, Alyssa looked away, not bothering to take the debate any further. With her eyes locked onto the countdown panel, she watched as 9 surrendered to 8, then 7, then 6.

‘Yo, Alyssa, you want to buy some skunk?’ Donk asked, flashing baggies of green.

‘No, thank you.’ Polite yet firm.

‘I can do you a Henry for a good price.’

‘Not interested.’ Still polite. Firmer.

‘It’s good shit.’

‘I said no, didn’t I?’ Farewell to politeness.

‘Suit yourself.’

To Alyssa, the opportunity to smoke her troubles away seemed hugely tempting, especially with all the stress she felt inside. Ah, but alas, a distinct lack of Queen’s faces on paper meant zero chance of an eighth of magic green herbage.

The remainder of the journey downwards was spent in silence. Donk was okay, but only in small doses. Given the chance, the lad loved nothing more than to bang on about his self-appointed role of gangsta of da block, tedious to say the least. However, Alyssa didn’t have time to get caught up in such banal waffle. She had places to go, people to see.

The G for ground floor couldn’t illuminate fast enough. The door took forever to decide to slide open. When it did, mother and baby were out of there. Fast.

Donk called after the disappearing girl, ‘If you change your mind, Alyssa, look me up, yeah?’ He then sparked up a king-size spliff and strutted into the foyer, the big I-am.

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Alyssa hadn’t stepped foot inside her former place of work since the day she’d been given her marching orders. In response to the sacking, the girl had threatened to play the tribunal card, but her heavily pregnant status at the time meant that she’d have had to quit the job soon enough anyway, so what was the point?

It was strange. Nothing had changed. Same supermarket, same annoying customers, same checkouts beep-beep-beeping, same roll-cages of stock blocking the aisles, same shelves being replenished by the same zombified people wishing they were somewhere else, anywhere but here, the list of sames went on and on and on.



As mother and child made their way through the store, Alyssa attempted to work out what she would say to Dan Benson, the supermarket manager. With a baby to look after, full-time employment was out of the question, but if she could wangle herself a part-time position, her current financial hiccup would be drastically improved. Oh, how she yearned to feel useful and contribute to society again. The thing is, what were the odds of Benson being in a good mood today? And more importantly, was he the forgiving type?

‘Alyssa!’ More of a high-pitched squeal of an animal in distress than a human greeting. It was Emma Smith, the girl who had been present during the pregnancy testing stick incident. ‘How the hell are you, babes?’ Before Alyssa could offer a reply, the smiling girl hastily added, ‘Sorry I haven’t been in touch lately, but you know how it is. Full diary and all that.’

Alyssa understood completely. Emma was a party girl, no time to stop. As such, her full diaries consisted of an equal balance between dates with random guys off Tinder, invites to wild parties and girlie nights out with her friends. The last major girlie piss-up Alyssa herself had attended was Miss Smith’s twenty-first which had taken place two weeks before Miss Abbott’s “with child” discovery.

The final time she’d had a night out. Depressing or what?

Looking back, God knows how many pubs they’d visited that evening, a voddy and coke and a line of shots in each venue, then onto a club, a night to remember. Or at least it would have been a night to remember if the pair of them could recall anything about it. Emma had woken up naked in bed with a guy with no name. She’d subsequently discovered two discarded condoms on the carpet. Two spent condoms. Which meant... two sex sessions she couldn’t recall. Most guys could only raise it the once. Twice in one night would have been worth remembering. Alyssa, meanwhile, had prized open two bloodshot eyes alone in the twice-a-night guy’s garden shed. Don’t ask. She couldn’t figure out how or why either? Mad or what?

The tragic part was, the evening in question had occurred during a totally different era, a happier, carefree time in Alyssa's life before the positive pregnancy test;

before she began to show;

before admitting her sins to a livid mother who had already worked it out;

before the father of her unborn child ran a mile;

before she lost her job;

before the agonising birth;

before her parents kicked her out;

before the emergency housing;

before the joys of fun and freedom waved a tearful goodbye and traded places with the endless slog of bottles, nappies and baby wipes;

before all her friends stopped texting offers of nights out, realising a stupid bitch on her own with a baby could no longer come out to play at the weekend;

before said friends all too quickly abandoned her, forgot about her, got on with their own lives, leaving the new mother to live a lonely, dreary, hermit-esque existence.

Oh, how she wished she could rewind to a time before she began to post constant status reports on social networking websites, telling the world she didn't mind no longer going out and having fun because her gorgeous baby, her beautiful son, her darling Oscar meant the world to his proud mother – "MY LITTLE MAN IS MY LIFE!!!" – and how nothing else mattered;

before she grasped the harsh reality that her social media posts were nothing more than a desperate cry for help from a single mother who couldn't possibly admit to the fact that she was lying to others... and more importantly, lying to herself;

before she realised that everybody else was intent on living his or her precious youth to the full without sparing a thought for a certain person who could no longer participate... through

no fault of their own, it needed to be mentioned, because an idiot called Alyssa had posted time and time again online about how she was happy being a stay-at-home mother;

before it was clear, oh, yes, crystal clear how these very same people hadn't worked out that her new motherly happiness was a complete work of fiction.

Fuck's sake, hadn't she dropped enough hints in the subtext?

Help me.

I'm not happy.

I know I say I'm happy.

But I'm not.

I'm all alone.

I'm fucking alone.

Sure, I have a baby for company.

But it's not the same.

Why. Don't. People. Realise. That?

Silence from her friends.

Total silence.

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

Alyssa Abbott, you have no messages.

Sigh.

Nobody was coming to save the silly girl who had trashed her freedom. As such, she had to face facts. Alyssa Abbott, pramface extraordinaire, was well and truly fucked.

And so, back to the reality of the supermarket, in response to Emma apologising for failing to keep in touch, a (fake) carefree Alyssa said, 'Oh, don't worry about it.' She then indicated to her child. 'Oscar's been doing a very good job of keeping me busy.'

Emma peered into the pram. 'Aww, look at him, he's so cute,' she cooed in the same way everybody did when relieved by the fact that they led a happy-go-lucky life with no snivelling brats to worry about. 'You must be so proud.'

'I am.' It was true. She was indeed proud of the son she had created, although not so proud of the regrettable events behind said creation.

'How old is he now?'

'Four months.'

'No way,' Emma gasped in the same way everybody did when surprised about time flying by so fast. 'Oh, Alyssa, it's been way too long,' she reflected in the same way everybody did upon realising they'd totally forgotten up until now about the unfortunate girl who was no longer part of the social scene, the nightlife scene, any frigging scene, all because Alyssa had been dumb enough to get herself knocked up. 'Hey, we should go out,' Emma then suggested. 'Are you free tonight?'

'Like, duh, Emma, I can't. I've got a baby to look after.' She couldn't believe she was jabbing a finger in the direction of the pram to enhance the grim reality of her plight.

Emma shrugged in a no-brainer manner. 'Then get yourself a babysitter.'

On the outside, Alyssa retained an affable demeanour. On the inside, she felt like screaming at the top of her voice, followed by the sheer anti-joy of smashing her own head against the nearest brick wall. Why did people without children always assume it was so bloody easy to get cover? Especially at such short notice.

'I haven't got any money,' Alyssa made a point of mentioning.

'Don't you worry about that, babes. Drinks on me tonight.'

A night out for free was certainly a tempting offer. More than anything, she'd love to let her hair down. If at this very moment in time, a free-of-charge babysitter happened to fall out of the sky, she'd be fine. However, as such an incredible miracle was unlikely to happen, it

looked as if a trip to her mother and father's abode was on the cards. The plan was simple. Creep like buggery and hope for the best. Oh, and while she thought about it, Alyssa figured she'd better ask Emma for her mobile number, just in case she had to make a "sorry, bad news, bummer, can't come out tonight" call if the plan went tits up.

'Babes, you've already got my number.'

'Oh, um... my phone fucked up. I lost all my contacts,' came Alyssa's lie. In truth, during a recent episode of fist-clenching frustration, followed by a teeth-clenching loss of all faith in humanity, she'd deleted all trace of the so-called mates who had abandoned the lonely girl stuck at home with a baby.

Emma dutifully offered across her phone details, then reiterated, 'You coming out on the razz tonight or what?'

'Alyssa?' A familiar male voice from behind.

Both girls turned around.

It was Dan Benson, the store manager, both hands propped upon hips, his face in stiffened stern mode, not best pleased to see the girl whose employment he'd terminated several months beforehand. 'What are you doing here?'

'Mr Benson,' Alyssa responded.

Benson insisted on the Mr prefix, no doubt to make him look more important, the twat.

'We need to talk,' she added.

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Benson ushered Alyssa, complete with accompanying pram, into his office and closed the door to the outside world. 'Take a seat.'

Alyssa parked the pram close at hand, then rested her posterior.

The manager sat behind his desk. ‘Alyssa, if you’ve come here to beg for your job back, forget it.’ Straight and to the point.

‘I need cash.’ Straight and to the point, right back at him.

‘It’s not going to happen.’

She kicked herself inside for believing her ex-manager might be a reasonable fellow. ‘I might have known you’d be like this.’

‘Hey, don’t blame me,’ came his biteback. ‘You’d have a job to come back to if you hadn’t been stupid enough to think you could get away with stealing money from the tills.’

‘I was desperate, I needed baby stuff.’ She dealt him a scowl. ‘I didn’t see you offering to help.’

‘And why on earth would I want to do that?’

‘You know why. You got me fucking pregnant.’

Benson rolled his eyes, oh, here we go again, tired of this conversation already. ‘Look, let’s get one thing straight, shall we? I’ve told you before, I don’t believe for a second that I’m the father of your child. We only did it the once.’

‘Yes. Unprotected. Which is how I got pregnant.’

‘Read my lips, Alyssa. Not. My. Problem.’

Typical. The bastard was attempting to wriggle out of the responsibility of parenthood. Not that she wanted the twat to fully act upon his paternal instincts. She couldn’t picture the two of them sharing domestic bliss, him reading the breakfast newspaper, her ironing his shirts. Ugh, the very thought of playing happy families with this vile dicksplash brought on a bad case of nausea. She did however want Benson to provide the financial element of his fatherly duties. Therefore, it was time for Plan B.

‘All right, forget about giving me back my job. I’ll settle for maintenance instead. I’m not asking for much. Just enough to –’

‘Alyssa, save your breath, it’s not happening,’ he interrupted. ‘I have a wife to support.’

‘Shame you didn’t think of your precious spouse when you shagged me right here on this desk.’

‘I shag a lot of girls. What makes you so special?’

‘I’m the mother of your child.’

Benson scoffed. ‘Allegedly.’

‘If you didn’t want this shit, you should have worn a condom.’

There came another theatrical roll of the eyes from Benson. ‘Even if I am the father, which I find highly unlikely, how was I supposed to know you weren’t on the pill? You didn’t say a word, you just let me get on with it. What do you think I am, a bloody mind reader?’

In her head, Alyssa ran through a long list of exactly what she thought he was. A cheat. A love rat. A player. A liar. A bastard. A wanker. A tosser. A crap shag. A certain C-word, etc, etc, etc.

Oh, how she regretted finding herself overwhelmed by an early-thirties man in a position of power, reeled in by his smooth chat, believing his lies, blinded by his promises, and to cap it all off, parting her bloody thighs for the dickhead. The dirty, sordid incident, it all happened so fast. One minute talking shop, the next, skirt hitched up, knickers off, both legs in the air, his trousers down, cock inside, wham, bam, thank you, mam. All over within a matter of minutes, hardly worth the effort, leaving the girl awash with mixed feelings, unfulfilled in one corner, guilty in the other, plus a side order of facepalm regret. She wouldn’t mind so much if her egg had been fertilised by the fruit of the most amazing, unforgettable, earth-moving, orgasm-explosive lovemaking session ever. At least it would have been worth it. In comparison, a quick bunk-up on an uncomfortable lump of varnished teak didn’t quite live up to expectations.

It never happened again. Well, of course it didn't. Dan the man had conquered Alyssa, job done, one more tick on his scorecard, then swiftly onto the next naïve bitch with a pretty face and margarine legs, i.e. easy to spread.

'These days, I always make sure I slip on a rubber,' Benson considered it relevant to declare.

'Oh, how noble of you.' Sarcasm at its most venomous.

'I mean, what was I thinking, going bareback with you?' He mock slapped his brow. 'What if I'd caught something? How the fuck would I have explained a sexually transmitted disease to the wife?'

The young mother's mouth flopped wide open, stunned by such a scathing remark. Huh, knowing Benson and his love of extra-marital sexplay, it was Alyssa herself who should have been worried about catching itchy nasties down below. Shit, thinking about it, maybe she should get herself checked out.

Why hadn't she realised at the time? Unprotected sex was mental. But no. During intercourse, she thought it would be fine. It was just the once without contraception. Surely there was no real risk. Even though the man went on to climax inside her, she still figured the odds of actually falling pregnant after a single attempt were a million trillion zillion to one. Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid girl.

'Are you calling me a slag?' she felt compelled to ask her former employer.

'Well, if the cap fits.' He leaned back in his chair, savouring his ex-employee's narrowed-eyed reaction to his words. 'Oh, come on, Alyssa. I know exactly what girls like you get up to. Parading around half-naked in your boob tubes and short skirts. Getting pissed up to the eyeballs. Every weekend going home with a different bloke.'



Alyssa felt like smashing a chair across the wanker's head. But no. The last headache she needed right now was a criminal record to add to her ever-growing list of failures. 'One thing I am not is a slapper.'

'Oh, yeah?' Benson pointed to the pram. 'That little brat and no ring on your finger tells a very different story.'

'That little brat happens to be your son.'

'Bollocks. He could be anybody's. Now piss off out of it, Alyssa, I've got work to do.' He peered down at his paperwork, scrawled a line or two of notes with a flashy pen, then returned his sights to the silently seething girl who sat opposite. 'Are you still here?'

The young mother said nothing more. No point. The man was a fully paid-up member of the asshole brigade. There was no chance of meeting half way and agreeing on a compromise, not with an asshole. And so, Alyssa stood up. Not uttering a word, she reunited herself with the pram and saw herself out of the office, no better off, with the minuscule trace of dignity she had left in tatters, feeling used, mugged and above all, shop soiled. Literally.

#fail

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It felt weird stepping foot inside her parents' flat as a visitor, especially as Alyssa had lived her entire pre-Oscar life within these four walls. Her first words, her initial wobbly steps, her school years, her teenage strops and squabbles, all these milestone events were linked to this very household, the property formerly known as home.

Her mother and father lived a good hour's walk from Alyssa's inner-city epicentre in an area classed as a safe distance from the indelible stain of metropolitan grime, yet not quite within the white picket fences and lovingly tended lawns of leafy suburbia. Looking back,

she'd enjoyed a satisfactory upbringing, unlike hundreds, if not thousands of unfortunate young victims of a city gone bad. Counting plus after plus on her fingers, she didn't come from a broken home, she'd never suffered any form of abuse, she hadn't been forced into crime as a way of life, nor had she plunged headlong into the darkest, deepest abyss of alcohol dependency. Sure, she liked her vodka, that's if she could remember what the bloody stuff tasted like, but on no occasion had she felt the desire to pour booze all over her morning cornflakes. Furthermore, she didn't take drugs... well, apart from the occasional smoke of weed, but never the addictive hard stuff. Oh, and above all, she had a brain. Hmm, pity she didn't use it more often. All in all, life had dealt the lass not too bad a hand during her childhood and teenage years. Ah, but how did she choose to repay her parents?

Easy.

By getting herself pregnant and awarding them with a bastard grandchild.

Judging by the way Dad loved to play the role of doting grandparent, even though Mum constantly scolded her husband for not supporting the poor little mite's head correctly, he didn't appear too bothered about an illegitimate baby in the family. Mum, however, never failed to display her true feelings on the subject, with the post-arrival conversation somehow always beginning along the lines of:

'Alyssa, you look like death warmed up.'

'Nice to see you too, Mum.'

Death warmed up? What did the expression even mean? Alyssa had never quite understood the rationale behind such a bizarre phrase. Surely death warmed up meant... well... alive.

Mum handed a welcoming mug of tea to her daughter. 'There you go.'

'Thanks.'

'Are you looking after yourself properly?'

Oh, here we go. Her mother always asked the same old truth-probing type of questions. In turn, Alyssa always offered the same old truth-hiding type of answers. ‘Yes, Mum. Stop fussing.’

‘I can’t help it. It’s natural for a mother to show concern. And don’t forget, there are two of you now.’ The new grandma indicated to her grandson. ‘Speaking of which, Oscar doesn’t seem to be putting on much weight. Are you feeding him correctly?’

Alyssa groaned. Loudly. Oh, how much more of this penetrating inquisition could she take? ‘The health visitor reckons he’s doing fine.’

‘Yes, but some of those health visitor types don’t even have children of their own. How on earth does that qualify them to make important judgements about vulnerable babies?’

Between cooing and oohing at Oscar, Dad came to his daughter’s rescue. ‘Oh, leave the poor girl alone, dear. I’m sure Alyssa’s doing the best she can under the circumstances.’

Alyssa was glad of the support. ‘Thanks, Dad.’

‘Well, I worry about the pair of you,’ was Mum’s defence for her actions. ‘Forever scrimping and scraping. Stuck all day and night in that god-awful flat.’

The daughter tossed her mother a double take. ‘You were the one who put me there.’

‘Alyssa, we kicked you out for your own good. It’s called tough love. How else are you supposed to learn how to stand on your own two feet?’

‘Your mother’s got a point there,’ was Dad’s next contribution, flitting back to the Mum camp in true double agent fashion. ‘And besides, at our time of lives, the last thing we need is a baby running around the place.’

‘Running around?’ said Alyssa. ‘Oscar’s four months old. He’s not even crawling yet.’

Dad flicked a dismissive wave of the hand. ‘Oh, you know what I mean.’

Deep down, Alyssa agreed. After all, they’d already served their time children-wise and were finally enjoying the rewarding tranquillity of child-free parole. Alyssa on the other hand

had made her proverbial bed. Getting the equally proverbial hang of laying in it without toppling out and falling flat on her face was the next step. Oh, yes, it was up to her, nobody else, to make a go of being a good mother. Of course, adopting a fair enough, whatever will be, *c'est la vie* approach didn't exactly make her grim situation any easier to stomach. She was woefully penniless, practically friendless and branded a bloodsucking welfare scrounger by strangers outside looking in. Argh, one mistake, one bloody mistake, the one single occasion in her sex life where she hadn't been careful now meant she was scarred for life, an outcast of civilised society, all her many hopes and dreams ruined.

In hindsight, the words, 'No, Mr Benson, I'm not that kind of girl,' no matter how cliché in context, sounded like the perfect contraception; safe, reliable and 100% guaranteed to prevent the hell she now faced. Even a simple, 'Jog on, tosser, as if I'd fuck you,' would have got the message across loud and clear. Shit, if the amount of times she'd kicked herself inside these last few months had been genuine blows to her body, Alyssa Abbott would be a dead woman ten million times over.

Sure, Alyssa had always planned on having children at some point, one boy, one girl, that's if nature would be so kind. However, falling pregnant at such a young age was never part of the deal. No, she'd earmarked the mid to late twenties era for starting a family, after first making sure she'd married the man of her dreams and bagged herself a lucrative career, shitloads of money in the bank, a fast car, a beautiful house and maybe even a dog. But never a cat. She hated felines and the pungent smell of their pee with a vengeance. Ah, but for Alyssa, it was now severe change of plan time. Namely, one kid, no man, no career, no money, no hope.

'Are you and Oscar all right, dear?' asked Mum, her eyes softening in a rare moment of compassion for her own flesh and blood. Wow, was she feeling the niggling jab of remorse

for casting her daughter into the bottomless pit of the unknown? No, surely not. ‘I mean really all right?’

Of course she wasn’t all right. Her current life was shit in every sense of the word, but revealing the naked truth would make the girl look like a total failure. Therefore, she settled for a not-so-naked reply. ‘Admittedly, things are tight at the moment. But we get by.’

Mum’s nose wrinkled, a visual verification of the woman’s displeasure. It was crystal clear. This woman knew all too well that “getting by” was but a hair’s breadth from “deep shit.” Any second now, the parent would lay her ace card and make the thunderous tremors of her scathing personal opinions well and truly felt.

‘I still don’t understand why the father of your child can’t contribute.’

There. Ace card laid.

Alyssa emitted a long-drawn-out sigh, just as she did on every fresh mention of the male half of her mistake. Ah, so this was the real reason for her mother’s brief lapse into honey-coated concern for the girl’s welfare, a sure-fire method of re-introducing the offending penis into the debate. Clever, very clever. The formidable Mrs Abbott, expert matriarch, was back to her usual probing, prodding self.

‘I’ve told you a million times, Mum, he is well out of the picture.’

Another nose wrinkle from Mum, far more prominent this time. ‘Oh, I would so love to give that man a piece of my mind. That is, if I knew who the spineless bastard was.’

Yes, that’s right. The guilty party was known only to Alyssa herself. Even Oscar’s birth certificate failed to contain any trace of the father’s identity.

‘Why won’t you tell us who he is?’ Mum asked for the zillionth time since the birth.

Alyssa cast her mind back to the recent fruitless meeting in Benson’s office. ‘Believe me, Mum, he’s a nobody. I’m better off without him.’

‘Better off? It’s a bloody disgrace, the way you’re perfectly content just to sit back and do nothing while that arsehole shirks his responsibilities.’ She pointed a finger in Oscar’s direction. ‘That poor child deserves a father.’

‘Mum, please, it’s just me and Oscar, it always has been. I don’t have a choice in the matter.’

‘Oh, you’ve always had plenty of choices, young lady. Keeping both legs firmly shut would have been the best one.’ She shook her head, disappointed in her daughter. ‘You can bet anything you like he’s out every night, leading the high life, young, free and single, not a care in the world.’

Young, free and single? Benson the bastard was certainly none of those.

‘It’s not right,’ Mum continued in unstoppable soapbox mode. ‘When do you ever get a chance to go out and enjoy yourself?’

Aha, this was the perfect opportunity for Alyssa to reveal the true nature of her visit.

‘Mum, can I ask you a favour?’

‘I’m not sure,’ responded a somewhat wary parent. ‘You know I don’t like that particular F-word.’

Even though the odds were slim, she decided to chance her luck anyway. ‘I bumped into a friend earlier. She asked me if I’d like to join her for a few drinks tonight. You know, to catch up on stuff.’

‘You can’t. You’ve got a baby to look after.’

‘Well, I could go out if...’ The latter half of the sentence was a no-show.

‘If what?’

Go on, Alyssa, she prompted herself inside. Ask her. ‘Mum, is there any chance you could babysit tonight?’

‘Babysit?’ Mum didn’t look too happy about such an out of the blue request.

To strengthen her case, Alyssa quickly added, 'It'll only be for a few hours.'

'How can you possibly afford to go to a pub?'

'Emma said she'll pay.'

'Huh, more fool her.'

Hope began to build up inside the girl. 'So will you look after him?'

'I'm sorry, Alyssa, but the answer's no.'

Hope collapsed. 'Mum, please. I haven't been out for months.'

'Whose fault is that?'

Her daughter fell silent, knowing the answer, but not wishing to admit it.

'Well?'

Alyssa sank. 'Mine.'

'Exactly. If it was for anything important, I might have said yes.'

Alyssa developed a hard-done-by demeanour, her last chance to get round the parent. It didn't work.

'Don't you look at me like that, young lady. Puppy-dog eyes might fool your father, but they won't wash with me.'

Dad looked up from cuddling Oscar. 'Eh?'

Mum added, 'You can't just palm off your child willy-nilly every time you feel like getting bladdered.'

'It'll be a couple of drinks and a chinwag, I promise.'

'The answer's still no.'

'Oh, Mum, it's been ages since I had some fun.'

'You should have thought about that before getting yourself into trouble.'

Thought about it? Huh, Alyssa had thought about nothing else since making the biggest mistake of her life.

Why. Hadn't. She. Ordered. Benson. To. Wear. A. Condom?

Well, that was it. A #fail of titanic proportions. Going out was a no-no. In that case, it was time to move swiftly onto the next begging session.

'All right, fine. But do you reckon you could lend me some money? A tenner will do, maybe twenty, just so I can get some electric and food.'

'Hah, I don't think so, do you?'

The young mother exhaled a sizeable huff of protest.

In response, Dad butted in with, 'It's not as if you don't get funded by the social, love.'

Mum nodded. 'Exactly. Learn to budget better and your finances will stretch much further.'

'I've tried. But the money, it just... goes.'

'On what?'

'I don't know, just bills.'

'Bills?' Mum frowned, puzzled. 'What bills? It can't be electricity. You've got a card meter.'

'I'm behind with the rent. And the water rates.'

'How? You're on benefits, you hardly pay any.'

Alyssa didn't know how or why either. 'I just am.'

Mum tutted. Loudly. 'Let me guess. Your money all goes on that overpriced so-called designer street clobber you young people love to wear. I'm right, aren't I? Oh, and while we're on the subject, for the life of me, I don't know why you feel the need to buy branded baby clothes. Oscar's hardly likely to know the difference, is he?'

'Cheaper gear doesn't last so long,' was Alyssa's excuse.

'Oh, rubbish.'



‘And look.’ From her handbag, Alyssa plucked an official looking envelope and held it aloft. ‘Now I’ve got bailiffs sending me threatening letters.’

Dad wanted to know, ‘How much do you owe them?’

Alyssa didn’t wish to state the exact figure aloud. It was far too embarrassing. Instead, she showed both parents the letter.

Her father winced in response to monies owed. ‘Ouch.’

Her mother did more than simply pull a facial expression. She gasped. Loudly. ‘How on earth did you run up this kind of debt?’

‘You know how it is. Catalogues and stuff.’

‘No, I don’t know how it is,’ retorted Mum, shaping her fingers into air quotes upon uttering the words “how it is.” ‘If I can’t afford something, I wait until I can. That’s the trouble with you young people these days. Want, want, want, now, now, now.’

‘I needed things for the flat when I moved in.’ She counted fingers as she reeled off her inventory of needed things. ‘Sofa. Table and chairs. Bed. Wardrobe. Cot. Kitchen stuff.’

‘Yes,’ hissed Mum, narrowing her eyes. ‘And that stupid colossal widescreen TV. You could have so easily done out your place with second-hand furniture. That’s what me and your father did all those years ago when we first moved in together.’

Alyssa exhaled a shameful sigh. ‘Oh, Mum, I’ve mucked things up, I know that now. But I am trying to get straight. Really, I am. I just need a bit of help.’

Mum let out a record-breaking sigh and groan duo. ‘Now, listen to me and listen good. When we said to you you’ve made your bed and now you’ve got to lay in it, we meant every word. Besides, if we give in to you the once, you’ll only keep coming back for more.’

‘I won’t. I promise.’

‘You will and you know it. I’m sorry, Alyssa, but my mind is made up. It may seem harsh to you, but tough love is the only way you’ll learn to face up to your responsibilities.’

Alyssa's absolute last-ditch attempt: 'So I take it that's a no then. On both counts.'

Mum peered down her nose at her daughter like a stern schoolteacher preparing to scold a wayward pupil. 'I think we both know the answer to that one.'

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Alyssa shuffled in no particular hurry through the familiar grey expanse of the car park that surrounded the towering concrete monstrosity she referred to as home shit home. She hadn't yet made the bad news call to Emma. The girl considered sending a quick soz text. But no. Way too impersonal. Glancing at the time on her phone, she knew full well that she needed to give her friend a buzz as soon as possible. After all, she'd hate for Emma to scrub her bits, straighten her hair, apply several coats of warpaint and rifle through her wardrobe for something sexy to wear tonight in vain. However, she couldn't find the right words. What could she possibly say? Failing to secure a babysitter was embarrassing. It meant she had no friends or family willing to assist, giving the impression that Alyssa was universally despised as a human being.

Maybe she was.

'No, no, no, don't look after the snotty-nosed sprog of that little slapper,' said the first imaginary voice of hatred deep inside Alyssa's tortured mind. 'She's horrible, she's scum, she's a whore.'

'No man on the scene?' asked a fellow disgusted voice, a woman this time. 'It must mean the slag is a nightmare to live with and impossible to love.'

'Somebody should put the bastard spawn of that dirty chav in care,' remarked a third disembodied voice, scathing and vindictive, the sour taste in its virtual mouth evident in the cruel tone. 'The stupid bitch doesn't deserve such a precious gift.'

Bloody hell, Alyssa certainly had a warped imagination. And to think, these shocking examples were only her own predicted observations of life's evil net curtain twitchers. Fuck knows what those opinionated resident onlookers were spitting for real.

'All right, Alyssa, how's it hanging?' A friendly male greeting.

The giver of the greeting was Donk, last seen taking a leak in the lift. But oh, this time, he was pushing a toddler in a buggy. Strange. Was this the real world or had Alyssa taken a wrong turn somewhere along the way?

'I didn't know you had a kid,' she commented.

'Nah, it's not mine. This is my little bruv.'

Alyssa frowned. The child couldn't be any more than two years of age. And there stood Donk in his early twenties. 'Age gap or what?'

'Yeah, innit? Connor's my half-brother, see? My mum, she kicked out my old man about three years ago and found herself a decent geezer.' Donk grinned. 'Ten years younger, the dirty minx.' He glanced at Connor and said to the boy, 'Yeah, your gangsta bro is looking after you. That's right, innit?'

'Yeah,' chirped the toddler, as if the exchange was all part of a game.

The older brother returned his attention to Alyssa. 'We're waiting for our mum to get home. She was up in court this afternoon.'

'What's she done?'

Donk rolled exaggerated, almost pantomime eyes, as if he couldn't get the staff. 'Oh, she gave this fat bitch from the fourth floor a good slap for slagging her off behind her back. The cow only went and pressed charges.' He overly shrugged, displaying his utmost bewilderment at how an incident that should have remained a private matter within the block now reeked of the stiff starch of legal officialdom. 'Can you believe that, man?'

'Shit happens.'

‘Yeah, innit?’ Donk was on the move. ‘Anyways, catch you later, yeah?’

‘Yeah, see you.’

Alyssa continued her approach towards the main entrance of the block. Then oh, she stopped in her tracks as an idea tapped on her mind’s shoulder. Despite his gangsta rapper bravado, Donk was clearly good with children. To a girl on the lookout for a babysitter, this was wonderful news.

‘Hey, Donk.’

The man in question turned around. ‘Yeah?’

‘Did you ever look after Connor when he was a small baby?’

‘Yeah, loads of times. Why?’

Alyssa dealt the overly sweet smile of a woman looking to get her own way. ‘Any chance of you doing me a really big favour tonight?’

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Alyssa shot a pout at the bathroom mirror, applying a sensuous shade of deep pink to her lips. There. Finished. The beautifully painted reflection of her happy-go-lucky former self who she hadn’t laid eyes upon for so long smiled back at her. Yes! It was all set to happen. Her first night out on the town since she’d received the lifelong prison sentence of motherhood. It seemed like years had passed. Centuries even. Could she still walk the walk and talk the talk in the pubbing sense? Who knows? She certainly felt rusty and unqualified, that’s for sure. Oh, God, she was so out of practice with the consumption of alcohol, the fear of passing out during the first few vodkas began to choke the girl’s confidence. To fall flat on her face, giggling like an imbecile in front of all those hip and chic nightlifers would be the ultimate double facepalm nightmare.

Returning to the bedroom, she self-deliberated tonight's choice of dress in the full-length mirror. With the garment's ruffled bottom hem floating high above the knees, did she consider it too short? Likewise, with its deep plunge neckline exposing more than enough cleavage, did she consider it too tarty? Hmm, she knew all too well an ultra-ultra-ultra-thin line existed between the alluring heights of looking attractive/appealing and the disagreeable depths of looking dirty/cheap. As it was, way too many people branded the girl as nothing more than a debauched leech. To add further fuel to an already raging inferno would not be in Alyssa's best interest. But... fuck it. This was her first evening out in ages, and more than likely the last for a very long time. Sod what the net curtain twitchers thought with their far-right bouts of sweaty masturbation towards anybody who dared not to conform to the norm. In Alyssa's eyes, her dress, her hair, her make-up, her high heels, her legs, her cleavage, in fact everything about the young woman who currently found herself striking a cheeky pose in the mirror was perfectly acceptable. So there!

Oscar cooed and clucked happily in his cot. Alyssa smiled at the child.

'You make sure you're a good boy for Uncle Donk tonight, all right?'

It was then when Alyssa felt a twinge of guilt. But why? This was not abandonment. Every mother deserved a break now and then, surely. Even so-called debauched leeches.

There then came a knock on the front door. Alyssa donned her cropped denim jacket, most inappropriate outerwear for a chilly spring evening, but did she care? No. Grabbing her handbag, she sailed over to the door and allowed Donk entry into the flat.

'Cheers for this,' she said to him. 'I'll sort you out some cash when I get my next money.'

'No, no, no, it's cool. Consider it a favour.' Donk rested his bottom upon the sofa, making himself at home. 'We're friends, yeah?'

Alyssa felt relieved by the man's kind gesture. After all, her next benefits payment was already all accounted for, just as it was on very handout day. Paying a babysitter would mean losing out on a decent grocery shop or knocking a bill on the head.

'Right, listen, I've got bottles of formula made up in the fridge,' she explained as Donk took possession of the TV remote and stabbed his way through the channels, none of which ever seemed to broadcast anything worth watching. 'All you'll need to do is warm –'

'I do know what I'm doing, Alyssa.' He tore his eyes away from the TV and offered across a smirk. 'It's all good. Just go out and enjoy yourself.' The man selected an agreeable music channel. Hip hop beats and sick rhymes blasted out. His face said it all. The guy was in aural heaven.

Alyssa hovered by the door. 'I won't be any later than midnight.'

Not taking his lookies away from the screen, he said, 'Take as long as you want, girl.'

The young mother tipped an appreciative nod. 'Thanks, Donk. See you soon.'

'Later.'

Alyssa left her flat, a free woman for the evening. This was the first time Alyssa had ventured into the outside world alone since Oscar's birth. It felt strange... and a little scary... but at the same time, hugely liberating.

Heh, smiling with a warm glow of anticipation, she whispered to herself, 'You'd better make the most of tonight, girl. You won't enjoy freedom like this too often.'

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Oh. My. God. Alyssa had forgotten how noisy a busy late bar could be, what with the sunglassed resident DJ grooving to the rhythm in his impossibly cramped booth in the far corner, pumping out audio fodder to a bouncing herd of dance floor revellers. Such

thunderous vibes were accompanied by a cacophonous chink-chunk-chink glassware backdrop as bar staff dashed from left to right with cat-like speed and agility, bartering banknotes for liquid pleasure. Oh, and to top it all off, the room was ablaze with the incessant chirping and twittering of a hundred or more nightlifers, all jabbering at once, all eager to offload complex yarns about who's hot, who's not and who's shagging what.

Emma paid for two voddy and cokes and handed one to Alyssa. 'There you go, babes. Get that down your neck.'

'Emma, I really appreciate this.' This very sentence had been repeated by Alyssa all evening, as if stuck on a permanent loop.

Ah, but it was true. Alyssa did appreciate the gesture. And what with Donk's very welcome display of benevolence earlier, the fledgling mother found herself beginning to realise she did indeed have a tiny scattering of people around her who genuinely cared. Of course, this warming revelation didn't stop the girl feeling like a freeloader. This particular round of drinks was already the third in this bar alone, even though barely an hour had passed since they'd first entered the premises. Before that, they'd enjoyed a number of drinks in a cheaper warm-up pub. Aside from the rising cost to her friend, at this rate of rapid alcohol consumption, would the unpractised Miss Abbott last the distance? She certainly hoped so. The grim prospect of waking up the next morning in a strange gutter, or worse still, in another strange shed, oh, God, not another strange shed, with her only company being the mother of all hangovers was not a pleasant thought.

Emma shrugged off Alyssa's continued bouts of appreciation. 'Oh, babes. Stop worrying about it. What are friends for?'

'Hey, Emma.' A new voice. Male.

Question: Who belonged to this new male voice?

Answer: It was Matt, a tall lad approaching his mid twenties whose surname had never been officially thrown in Alyssa's direction. The man had successfully managed to push his way to the head of the bar queue, his quest for much-needed refreshment now requiring the final task of catching the attention of a member of the plentiful yet at the same time elusive bar staff.

'Long time no see,' he added.

'Oh, hi, babes,' Emma squealed, offering the guy a friendly embrace. 'Wow, yeah, it's been ages.' She pulled Alyssa into view. 'Alyssa, you remember Matt, don't you? Used to go out with whatsherfuckingname with the ginger hair.'

'Kate,' filled in Matt.

'That's the one. I am so glad you dumped her. I never really got on with the girl. Too up her own arse for my liking.'

Matt nodded. 'Yeah, she was a bit.'

'A bit?' Emma then volleyed tennis eyes to and fro between Matt and Alyssa. 'Well? Aren't you two going to say hello to each other.'

'Hi.' Alyssa raised a hand, a half-arsed greeting of sorts. It was awkward. She didn't know him that well.

'Hi,' he said in return. Then came a frown. 'I thought you had a kid now.'

Emma volunteered as head spokeswoman on behalf of her friend. 'She has. A baby boy.' With a giggle, she added, 'But she's hardly likely to bring him out to a place like this, is she?'

'Yeah,' came Alyssa's contribution with a smile. 'I am allowed a night off.'

Although the line had been expressed as a tongue-in-cheek quip, Matt remained strangely poker-faced. Taking note of such a staid reaction, Alyssa's smile faded to nothing.

Emma picked up on the awkwardity and brandished a bright beam. 'Well, us girls can't stand around here all evening. We've got serious dancing to do. See you around, Matt.'



‘Yeah, sure. Have fun.’

Emma steered Alyssa away from the bar area and over to the edge of the dance floor.

‘Hey, guess what? Matt fancies you.’

‘Really?’ This was certainly news to Alyssa. After all, the man hadn’t looked too smitten back at the bar. ‘What makes you think that?’

‘He told me.’

‘When?’

‘About...’ She tried to work it out in her head, then added, ‘...just over a year ago. Not long after he’d got shot of the ginger freak.’

‘You never said.’

‘I didn’t think he was your type, so I didn’t bother telling you.’

Alyssa thought about it. Emma was right. Matt wasn’t exactly the kind of guy she’d be interested in. He came across as a little too introvert for her liking. She preferred males of the species with a tad more oomph. On reflection, however, had she truly given Matt a chance? Back in the day, she’d seen him around in pubs or at parties, but the girl had never properly spoken to him as such. This was mainly because she’d spent the majority of her time ogling oomph-charged men who in retrospect always turned out to be the bad apples of the orchard. Hmm, maybe she’d be better off investing more time and energy on the shyer, nicer types of fruit. Yes. Good call.

Oh. Hold on. Just over a year ago? Shit. If she’d hooked up with Matt back then, she wouldn’t have shagged Dan Benson in the office of doom... which meant she wouldn’t have fallen pregnant... which meant her life would have turned out a whole lot different. Sure, she loved Oscar, but thinking about it, the choice of raising a baby later in life seemed far more agreeable.

‘Emma, it would have been nice to decide for myself whether or not he was my type,’ Alyssa chose to mention, a tad narked by being kept in the dark.

‘Oh. So you do fancy him?’

‘Stop putting words into my mouth.’

Emma grinned. ‘But you do, don’t you?’

‘I don’t even know the guy. Not properly. And besides, I’m not looking for a relationship.’

‘Who said anything about getting serious? Babes, think about it. Matt likes you. That means you’ve got guaranteed cock for tonight.’

Alyssa screwed up her face. ‘Is that what you think I’m looking for?’

‘Isn’t every girl?’

‘No. Been there, done it, got a screaming baby to prove it.’

‘Oh, yeah, I keep forgetting you’ve got a kid.’ Then came an afterthought. ‘Hey, you never did spill the goss on the father.’

‘Let’s just say it’s somebody I’d rather not talk about.’

‘Ah, I get it.’ Emma’s face was awash with the all-seeing, all-knowing eye. ‘Minger, is he? Too ugly to reveal in public?’

Alyssa was unwilling to grace such an empty presumption with an answer. Instead, her response came packaged as, ‘Believe me, Emma. All I’m after is a drink and a dance.’

‘Yeah, well, suit yourself. But there’s no way I’m planning on leaving this place empty-handed.’

A flash of concern spread across Alyssa’s face. ‘Emma, if you pull tonight, will you promise me one thing?’

‘Yeah, anything, babes.’

‘Don’t let it happen without a condom.’

Emma's face crumpled. 'What do you think I am, a stupid dickhead slag with no brain? Only total twats do it without contraception.' Oops, the girl then realised she was talking to a victim of the sod a condom brigade. 'Oh, babes, I didn't mean you were... um...' Her foot was firmly lodged in her big mouth.

'It's fine,' Alyssa responded, painting a forced smile on her face to mask the searing pain of truth. She was no slag, far from it, but she wholeheartedly agreed with her friend's total twat remark. 'Don't worry about it.'

Emma's attention was suddenly redirected. 'Aye-aye,' she uttered, clocking a handsome guy standing at the other side of the dance floor. 'Looks like I might have found exactly what the doctor ordered.'

Alyssa smirked, typical Emma.

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The girls danced. The girls drank some more. The night was rocking.

Emma eventually broke away to pull the guy she fancied at the bar. God, she was all over him, but Alyssa didn't mind. She was perfectly happy to continue throwing shapes on the dance floor. After all, that's what she's come here to do.

Ah, but alas, even though she was having a fantastic time, Alyssa couldn't help but think of Oscar. Was he behaving himself? Had he settled down to sleep without too much fuss? Was Donk hacking the babysitting lark? And was her baby boy missing his mummy? She was certainly missing him.

Alyssa broke free from the noise and the revelry and headed across to the ladies' toilets. She didn't bother telling Emma where she was going. No point. Miss Smith was otherwise engaged. She'd be back in a few minutes anyway. Once inside, she claimed the only vacant

cubicle and urinated for England. The usual musings about cutting out the middle woman by simply tipping her drinks straight down the lavvy made themselves known. Somehow, they always did. Pee spent, she pulled up her knickers, then sat back down on the porcelain throne while she plucked her mobile from her handbag and made a call to Donk.

The dialling tone went on and on, then diverted to voicemail. Uh oh. Worrying. She tried again. Dialling tone, voicemail. And again. Same scenario. What the fuck? On the fourth attempt, Donk answered the call.

‘Yo.’

‘It’s me. Alyssa.’

‘Yeah, I know. It says so on my phone.’

Alyssa smiled. In an age where all handset displays told recipients exactly who was calling, she wondered why a large number of people, not just herself, still insisted on identifying themselves upon connection.

‘What’s up?’ Donk asked.

‘Just checking if Oscar has been a good boy tonight.’

‘Yeah, yeah, no probs. I gave him a bottle about half an hour ago. The kid, he is out like a light.’

‘Glad he’s been all right for you.’

It felt weird for Alyssa not to have given her son the aforementioned bottle and put him to bed herself. In a surreal way, it felt almost voyeuristic.

‘I’ll be home soon,’ Alyssa felt compelled to mention.

‘No, no, no, take your time.’ Donk was most insistent. ‘Don’t feel you have to hurry back on my account. Stay out as long as you like. I got this gig covered.’

Alyssa grinned. ‘Looks like I’ve been told.’

‘You know it, girl.’

‘I really appreciate this.’ Oh, here we go again with all the appreciating. ‘See you soon.’

‘Later, Alyssa. Over and out.’ And Donk hung up.

There then came a sudden rap on the cubicle door.

‘Oi, are you planning on being long in there?’ called a drunk girl.

‘I’ll be out in a sec,’ Alyssa called back, tossing her mobile into her handbag and standing up.

‘Thank fuck for that,’ came the girl’s reply as the cubicle door opened. ‘For a minute there, I thought I’d have to piss in a sink.’

Alyssa left the toilets and walked over to the bar. Oh. Emma had vanished. So had the guy. Oh, great. The last downer she needed right now was her supplier of tonight’s drinks doing a disappearing act. She was presently at the precarious tipsy stage and required another voddy or two to elevate herself to the dizzy heights of the fabled magical city of Inebriatia, twinned with Drunktown. If she didn’t bag herself a fresh fix of alcohol pronto, she knew she’d soon lose the zing and start sobering up, perish the thought. So where the hell was Emma? Huh, no doubt somewhere dark and secluded with a certain male of the species.

Aha, she spotted Matt at the other end of the bar in possession of a fresh pint of lager and trotted over to him. ‘Matt, have you seen Emma?’

‘Not lately, no. I thought she was with you.’

‘She was. Until she decided to eat some guy’s face. And now she’s gone AWOL.’ Hmm, with Emma out of the picture, she needed to seek emergency alcohol elsewhere. This led to the question, ‘Any chance you could buy me a drink?’

‘Why would I want to do that?’

The man’s standoffish demeanour threw the girl. Why was he acting this way? Maybe he was the mean and moody type. Or maybe he was just plain miserable.

‘Emma reckons you fancy me,’ she felt compelled to offload.

‘Does she now?’

His statement didn’t exactly quench her curiosity. Nor did it seem to bring her any closer to a fresh vodka. Therefore, a touch of prompting was in order. ‘Well? Is it true?’

‘Yeah, I’m not scared to admit it. I did have a bit of a thing for you. But not any more.’

Alyssa found herself bewildered by the remark. Especially the last four words. ‘Why the sudden change of heart? I’m still the same Alyssa Abbott.’

‘No, you’re not. You’ve got a kid. That changes everything.’

Okay, so now Alyssa was really confused. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Oh, get with it, Alyssa. My folks would do their nut if I brought home a girl like you.’

‘A girl like me?’

‘Yeah. A single mother on benefits. The very bottom of the food chain.’

This particular single mother on benefits found herself fighting to hold back the inevitable onslaught of tears. Oh, God, she thought. Don’t start boo-hooing, not here, not now. ‘I can’t believe you’re being so horrible.’

‘I’m only speaking the truth.’

She didn’t have an answer for that. Mainly because, in a roundabout way, it was indeed an accurate statement. Alyssa Abbott, the food chain bottom-feeder. Of course, knowing she was the lowest of the low didn’t make it any easier to take on the chin.

‘I did fancy you, big-time,’ Matt continued. ‘But then you went and spoilt it all by opening your legs for fuck knows who and giving the country another screaming brat to pay for.’

Ouch.

After downing a sizeable mouthful of lager, he added, ‘I’m sorry, Alyssa, but I’m not into soiled goods.’

Double ouch.

Matt wasn't quite done yet. He completed his bite of venom with, 'Enjoy your...' Open finger air quotes. '...night off.' Close finger air quotes. He then picked up his pint and walked away, leaving Alyssa dumbstruck, gobsmacked and very, very alone.

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Within a matter of minutes, Alyssa found herself walking home. No point in staying at the late bar any longer. Emma had clearly buggered off with her latest erection and Matt had expressed in no uncertain terms exactly what he thought about the soiled Miss Abbott. The girl had considered staying on at the establishment, using girl-charm to wangle a few drinks out of any guy willing to offer her enough attention. But no. Whatever mug she reeled in would only expect to get his willy wet at the end of the night for his troubles. Men always did, the evolutionary sowers of wild seeds.

A car pulled up beside her. The passenger window whirred down.

'Excuse me.' The driver looked to be a man in his fifties.

Oh, here we go. Another poor soul lost in the city. She got this a lot. The scenario always played out the same. He'd ask the way to so-and-so road, street, avenue, whatever. She'd explain the need to take the first left, then the first right and carry on until he met the roundabout, where he'd then have to come off at the third exit into this-or-that street, blah, blah, blah, and so on, and so on. The driver would then thank Alyssa for her kindness and be on his way, forgetting the colossal bible of directions in an instant, and so thus remaining as lost as ever in a city which boasted a million road signs, but a million more roads to nowhere.

The man added, 'Are you... you know... open for business?'

His bizarre query confused the girl. Was this driver under the influence of drink or drugs? Or even a cocktail of both? 'Am I what?'

‘I have money.’ He held aloft a couple of twenty pound notes to validate his statement.

‘What are your rates?’

Alyssa found herself truly befuddled. Rates? What the fuck was this guy snorting? She took a closer look at the man, just in case she later needed to give the police an accurate description, should anything untoward happen. Strange. He seemed like a normal everyday citizen, an average Joe in an ill-fitting off-the-peg suit. Ah, but then she clocked him eyeing up her attire, the short dress, the high heels, taking particular interest in her legs and cleavage. Shit, that’s when she realised exactly what he was getting at.

‘You think I’m a prostitute?’

‘Well, yes. That’s what you are, aren’t you?’

Alyssa’s jaw hung limp. Frigging charming. It was bad enough being branded a scummy single mother, a drain on the welfare state and God knows what else without adding desperate street hooker to the list. ‘Jog on,’ she hissed, hastily marching onwards.

‘Oh. Sorry. My mistake.’

‘Huh, you got that right,’ she grunted, not looking back

Alyssa then stopped dead in her tracks. What was she thinking? A total stranger had just offered her money. Yes. Cold hard cash. A valuable commodity she currently required more than oxygen. But no. She couldn’t. Surely not. Ah, but it was money. Funds for a hungry electric meter. Food for an even hungrier belly. And a fresh tin of formula milk for Oscar. Argh, no, no, no, no, no. The very thought of it was wrong. Depraved. Immoral. Nothing more than sordid abuse of her body. But hold on. Money was on offer here. For what exactly? Sitting back on a reclined car seat with her legs wide open. What could be easier? Within ten, maybe fifteen minutes, it would all be over. And then she’d be on her merry way home with serious currency in her hand.

The girl turned around, alarmed to notice the car pulling away. ‘No, wait!’



The driver hit the brakes. 'Yes?'

She took a deep breath to steady her nerves, then asked, 'Have you got any condoms on you?'

'I have, yes.' A bemused frown then creased his brow. 'Aren't you supposed to supply the contraception?'

How should Alyssa know? She'd only been a lady of the night for the last few seconds. 'No, I...' What to say, what to say? '...I've run out.'

The burning question soon made itself known. 'How much for full sex?'

Alyssa's conscience began to scream blue murder, but she chose to ignore the yelping voice of reason. Oh, God, here goes. Let bidding commence. 'Fifty.'

'Fifty?' The driver scoffed, as if. 'You're having a laugh.'

'Forty.'

He shook his head. 'No chance.'

'All right. Thirty.'

'Listen, sweetheart, if I've got to supply my own condom, I expect a generous discount.'

Alyssa exhaled. This guy certainly drove a hard bargain. 'Twenty-five.'

'Twenty. Take it or leave it.'

Her eyes bulged. 'Twenty notes?' Insult or what?

'Yep. Final offer.'

Alyssa stood there in faltering silence, not knowing quite what to say or do next.

'Fine,' he grunted, tired of waiting for a response. 'I'll try elsewhere.' He threw his car into gear and prepared to drive away.

'No, no, don't!' Oh, God, her high-pitched haste sounded way too frigging needy and desperate. 'Twenty, it is.'

The man wore the proud smile of victory. 'It's a deal. Hop in.'