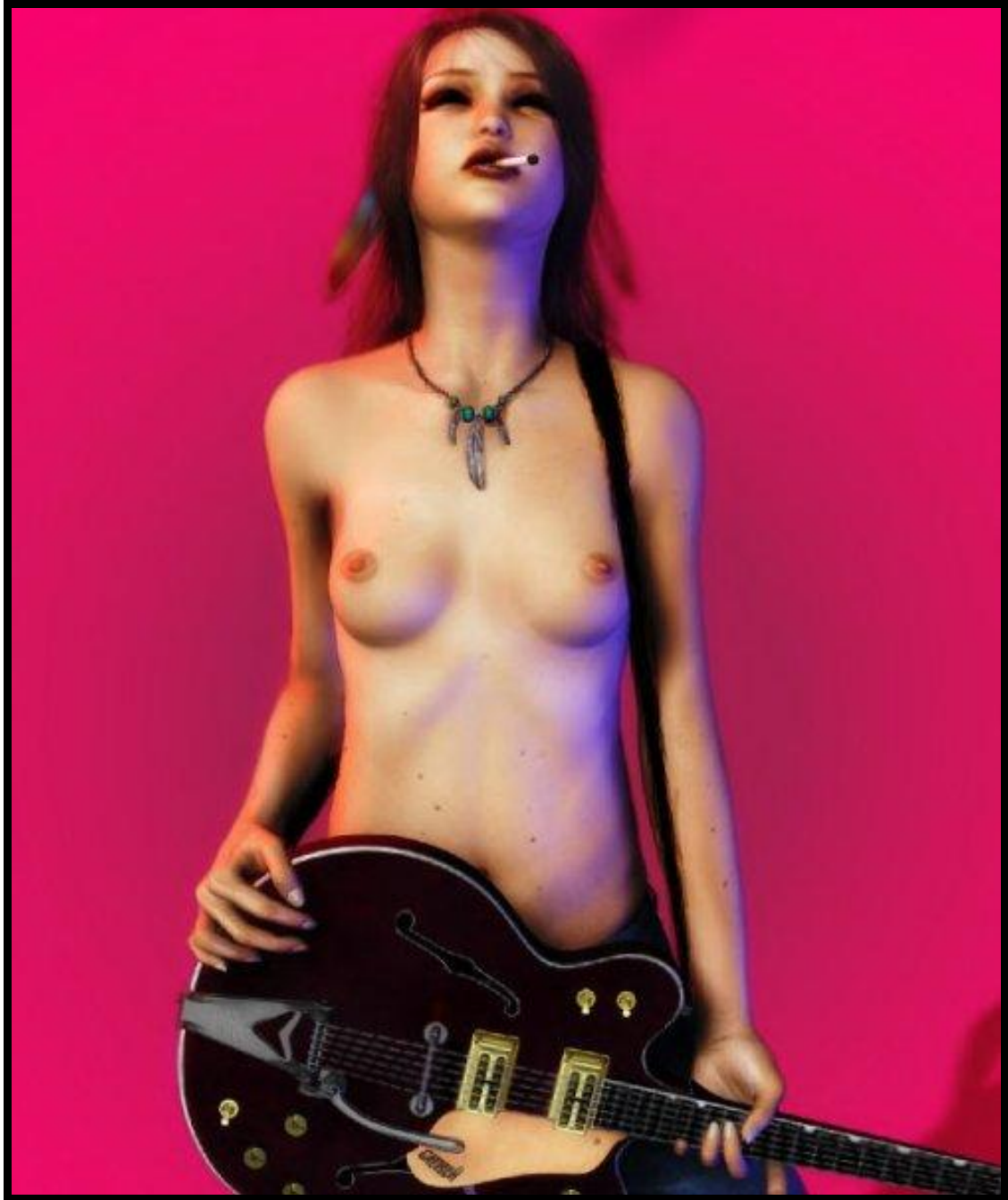


# Excess

Bradley Stoke



Long before she let herself through the front door it was obvious to Tabitha that Sunbeam was home. From several doors down the suburban street she could hear the sound of seventies heavy metal and, accompanying the record, Sunbeam's own guitar playing that was roughly, but not exactly, in tune. It was a wonder the neighbours didn't complain more than they did.

As always, Tabitha couldn't help noticing the remarkable similarity between Sunbeam's own song compositions and those on the rock music records she accompanied. Sunbeam's father had given his daughter a comprehensive collection of vinyl records that represented his musical tastes before they shifted toward the anodyne whine of AOR away from the squawking cat-shriek and doomy chords of the records he'd enjoyed in his adolescence. At least in Sunbeam's hands, the records hadn't gone to waste.

Tabitha was the manager of Excess Baggage, the all-girl rock group for which Sunbeam was principal composer, singer and lead guitarist. However, she still had difficulty in relating her best friend from school, her first lover and the girl who used to deal pills in the school playground as Sunbeam, rock star. She still hadn't become accustomed to how much the stage name had superseded her real name. In fact, Tabitha even sometimes forgot what it was.

But, as Tabitha reflected, pushing aside the bicycle propped against the hallway radiator and easing off her Dr Martin's airwear boots, the fortunes of Excess Baggage had a long way to go yet until Tabitha could afford to drop her gig as a Hard House DJ at the Marsh Club. Or until Sunbeam, for that matter, could close shop on her small-scale dealing. And if Sunbeam's brother wasn't so generous in allowing his

sister and her sister's best friend to share his suburban semi, would they ever have found somewhere else they could afford to live?

"Hiya, sweetheart!" Tabitha announced, pushing open the living room door, knowing exactly what sight would greet her.

And, indeed, no surprise at all. There was Sunbeam, cross-legged in the middle of the room, wearing only the baggy pair of thin cotton shorts they had brought back from their holiday in Morocco last year. Her rather large breasts overshadowed the guitar resting on her lap and strapped around her shoulder, and all around her, and spread in all directions were album sleeves, black twelve-inch vinyl records gathering dust, a coffee mug, ashtrays, cigarette packets and a small plastic bag where Sunbeam stored her stash. A soggy roach languished in the ashtray amongst the cigarette butts. Sunbeam raised her head toward Tabitha, a slightly stoned smile across her face, while she pushed a curtain of mousy-brown hair off her eyes.

"Hiya, cherry bomb!" Sunbeam replied, pulling a cigarette out of a packet and lighting it up.

"Hey! What's the tune? It's a lot like your *Pussy Power*, only the lyrics aren't quite the same."

"It's by Atomic Rooster," replied Sunbeam. "And fuck, Tabby, if I hadn't changed the lyrics people would twig where I get my inspiration from."

Tabitha nodded. She had guessed long ago that just as a techno or house DJ might build up a composition by sampling vinyl records, Sunbeam did much the same with her own song writing. And the more obscure the record, the less likely that anyone would figure out where it came from. So, Sunbeam's father's old records, by

the likes of Bad Company, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Pink Fairies, Budgie and Vanilla Fudge were taking on a new life in the copyrighted songbook of Excess Baggage. Although Sunbeam joked about her systematic theft of the heavy metal legacy to deflect the criticism she so wholly deserved, Tabitha wasn't even so sure that her friend drew the line at just lifting the guitar chords. Her song lyrics on demons, fast cars, hobbits, guns and sex bore ever such a similarity to those of the selfsame rock groups. Although the sex of which she sang did not generally involve the participation of men.

“And Tabby, sweetest, I've had a thought...” remarked Sunbeam, blowing smoke out through her nostrils.

“Yeah?” wondered Tabitha, sitting down on the sofa and crossing her long black legs. She twiddled a plaited hair extension in her ring-festooned fingers.

“*Excess Baggage* is just too long a name. We ought to drop the ‘*Baggage*’ bit. Just call the band ‘*Excess*’.”

“‘*Excess*’? Wasn't there a group in the eighties or nineties called that?”

“It was called ‘*InXS*’. Bunch of ozzies. Anyway, they only ever did one decent song. I think ‘*Excess*’ would be a much better name than ‘*Excess Baggage*’.”

“But everything we've done or promoted has been as ‘*Excess Baggage*’, sweetheart. We can't just change it.”

“Course we fucking can! *Massive Attack* changed their name to *Massive*. *Tyrannosaurus Rex* changed theirs to *T. Rex*. *Electric Light Orchestra* became just fucking *ELO*. Loads of groups have changed their names. And anyway, a name like ‘*Excess*’ would be more appropriate for the group's image than ‘*Excess Baggage*’. It

makes us sound like some kind of fucking modern jazz group or garage house crew. We're a fucking rock group. Rock music's always been about excess. And it's about time we had the right kind of fucking name!"

Although Tabitha was reluctant to admit it, even to herself, the name was especially appropriate given Sunbeam's more recent tendencies. She was certain that Sunbeam was consuming at least as many drugs as she sold, and although she only dabbled in heroin, Tabitha wasn't sure she would never become addicted. And the sex! As her drug consumption increased, Sunbeam seemed to have lost her ability to discriminate. She called herself 'polyamorous', which Tabitha first misheard as 'polyandrous', which was nonsense given her stated sexual preference. But although Tabitha confined her interest to women, and still had frequent sex with Sunbeam, despite them no longer being an item, her friend had now developed an enthusiastic taste for sex with men as well.

This shocked Tabitha at first. But she and Sunbeam had already chosen to sleep in separate rooms, and that wasn't only because of Sunbeam's frequent and open infidelity. Tabitha had sensed, sometimes too acutely, that she had become Sunbeam's token black woman lover and that the emotional content of their love, so intense in their early teens, had become subsumed by considerations of outward appearance. It had been difficult for Tabitha to reconcile her sexuality and her love for her parents, who were traditional black Baptists and so thoroughly appalled by Tabitha's unholy sexual preference that only the genuineness of their Christian love kept them from disowning their daughter.

Sunbeam never experienced a predicament like that. Her parents had never

hidden from her either their indulgence in soft drugs or their participation in swinging sex parties. And, as Tabitha only gradually came to appreciate, their daughter was intent on attaining a degree of libertarianism that even her parents had never entertained. So, Sunbeam not only distracted herself with hard drugs and sex with men, but also (and this disturbed Tabitha rather more than she imagined possible) sex with her own brother. But what upset Tabitha the most wasn't so much the fact of incest (a word that seemed to lose some of its meaning when applied to a real life situation), but that Sunbeam considered it as some kind of a token achievement, to tick off as something she'd done, like having a black lesbian lover, like having sex with two or three men at the same time, like drinking her lover's urine, like dropping GHB, like fucking that boy they'd met in that Moroccan hotel, and, like, as Tabitha had to admit, having sex on stage during a gig.

“Well, after that time at the Willow, I guess *Excess* isn't a bad name at all!” exclaimed Tabitha before leaning over to help herself to a plastic bag of grass lying on the ground.

“Oh fuck, Tabby! You don't fucking forget, do you!”

Tabitha shook free some papers from her packet of Rizlas, and licked the edge of them before piecing together the two-and-a-half skinner she was so adept at constructing.

“I didn't agree to be your manager as well as do my own gigs just to run some kind of fucking sex show, Sunbeam.”

“It was only the once. It's like the music got to me...”

“Or the coke. Or the E. Or some other stuff. And did Joanne really want you to

stick that dildo right up her twat like that?”

“When Joanne’s on stage and she’s ‘Marsh Mallow’, she’s like real uninhibited.”

“It can’t be easy to play bass and have someone pull down her jeans, lick her clit and shove a dildo up her front. But Joanne’s performing as Marsh Mallow, bassist, not Marsh Mallow, porn star. And since when have you gone from just partial nudity, which we always agreed was OK, to full on stark naked? No wonder we’re getting more men in the audience and fewer of the old lesbian crowd.”

“You’re just being fucking preachy. Just like your dad. But what about it, Tabby? Shall we change the name to ‘*Excess*’?”

“It’s a lot of hard work you know. There’s a lot of promo stuff I’ve got to change. And I’ve got that gig in Stockport on Friday.”

“When d’you think we could get it done? I told the other girls: Joanne, Prissy, Anita and Carla. They think it’s gonna be for the gig on Saturday.”

“I guess I’ll be able to do that,” Tabitha sighed, knowing that she wouldn’t have much time to buy new discs for her big session at the Tick Tack. She’d just have to hope the record shops in Manchester had some decent tunes she could feature.

Tabitha was exhausted when she got back from Stockport, having snatched only a few hours doze in the back of her battered Astra at a service station. She didn’t have much time to do more than unload her record boxes in the hallway, with the assistance of Sunbeam’s brother, Tom, who as always was trying to persuade her to have sex with him.

“Sorry, Tom. I’m what it says on the label,” Tabitha said with a grim smile

after Tom had made his latest overture. “Where’s Sunbeam?”

“She’s at Anita’s. Or Sticky Goo as she calls herself now.”

“I guess I’ll just have to hope she makes it to the Fig and Firkin for tonight,” Tabitha sighed, knowing that when Anita and Sunbeam started making love it was often quite a huge effort to separate them. And if Carla got involved, well, they’d either be late or thoroughly wasted. Or more likely, both.

The landlord at the Fig and Firkin watched Tabitha as she set up the stage equipment with the help of Prissy and Joanne. As always, Sunbeam was not one of the first to arrive, and the fact that Anita and Carla were also not there made Tabitha fear the worst.

“So it’s gonna just be a dyke crowd, is it?” remarked the landlord from the bar stool where he sat. “A load of grrrls with short hair and jumble sale chic. But what’s this I hear about your group attracting the boys now?”

Tabitha knew exactly what the landlord was hinting at. “The group’s emerging from the dyke ghetto. That’s all.”

“I heard that your singer’s been having sex on stage. Not just taking her clothes off, which I don’t mind. I quite like a flash of tit, me. But actually like fucking doing it on stage. I’ve got a license to worry about, you know. This isn’t fucking Soho.”

“That’s just crap, Phil. And you know it. It’s just queer consciousness. Getting away from denying our sexuality. That kind of thing. There’s not gonna be any sex on stage.”

“I dunno. You’ve changed the name. What kind of ‘excess’ are you intending



to represent?”

“An excess of political correctness, Phil. What d’you think? Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve got to test the sound system.”

Tabitha’s assurances were rather wasted. When Sunbeam arrived, she, Carla and Anita were quite obviously still high, not helped by a pint of beer drunk at the bar while Tabitha did a DJ set, mixing some of Sunbeam’s rather dull heavy metal records with the hard house she much preferred. And then, finally, the group ascended the stage for the first time ever in their current incarnation.

“So give it up for Excess!” announced the landlord. “That’s Sunbeam, Sticky Goo, Marsh Mallow, Krakatoa and Daffodil!”

The five girls strode onto the small stage, Sunbeam and Sticky Goo carrying their guitars and Marsh Mallow her bass guitar. Krakatoa, or Prissy, seated herself behind the drum kit. And Daffodil, or Carla, behind the synths. As they appeared, the crowd, many of whom were the same ones who’d been following the group for over a year now, erupted into a huge applause.

Tabitha noticed with alarm that Sunbeam had already taken off all her clothes and was standing on stage with her guitar slung around her, just beneath her heavy breasts, and a pair of fourteen-hole Dr Martin’s on her feet. She strode up to the microphone, took it in one hand, but didn’t lift it off the stand, pushed her hair off her face and for a moment looked quite bewildered. Only the applause and cheers from the audience filled the space. And then she slurred into the microphone.

“Hello, Fig and Fucking Firkin! We’re gonna fucking rock you!”

And with that, Daffodil, Marsh Mallow and Krakatoa launched into ‘*Hot Dyke*

*Dreaming*', always a good starter, with its swirling Deep Purple organ chords, its Guns & Roses guitar sound and that thumping beat that sounded ever so much like '*Purple Haze*'. Tabitha noticed with relief that the coke and beer hadn't too aversely affected Sunbeam's singing voice. Nor her guitar-playing. Not that anyone would really have noticed with the poor pub acoustics. In fact, the most wasted was probably Carla who, at one stage, actually used the wrong programming sample, of which she only became aware after Marsh Mallow strode across the stage, wearing what most people might consider to be her underwear, and pointed it out to her.

Tabitha settled down on a stool at the back of the stage, a pint of real ale in one hand, the least strong available, and a cigarette in the other. She didn't actually much enjoy the music Sunbeam's group played. Rock music sounded rather predictable and dull to her ears, and even when the lyrics were filtered through a lesbian consciousness they really didn't have the depth she associated with the soul or hip hop she preferred. And even though she got quite a high from caning hard house, it was generally a tape by someone like Macy Gray or Miss Dynamite that she put on when she drove back home after a gig.

However, it was evident that Excess was doing something right. The number of people who turned up at an Excess gig was steadily rising. In the early days of Excess Baggage, when the name was meant as an ironic statement of there being two sexes, rather than just the one, there would have been only a couple of dozen people in the audience, all women, and almost all just friends or ex-lovers of the group members. Now the place was full to capacity, and the crowd was quite a mix. In fact, a very heterogeneous mix with almost as many men as women. And these weren't all

the kind of men who used to come to an Excess Baggage gig. Rather fewer of the gauche intellectuals, politically correct squatters and gay men. Indeed, many of the men were sporting tee-shirts by distinctly uncool rock groups like Iron Maiden, AC/DC, Metallica and the Scorpions. Many had the stereotypical long hair and denim of the heavy metal crowd, but even those without the standard dress looked rather less like men who appreciated the subtlety of confrontational gender politics, and rather more like men who practised air guitar in front of their mirrors.

Tabitha was also alarmed when the set became gradually more and more sexually explicit. Clearly, Sunbeam had been plotting it in advance with Anita and Carla, but, as always, Joanne was easily persuaded. In the midst of songs like '*Clit Lickers*', '*Fist My Ass, Doreen*' and the perennial favourite, '*Love Blouse*' (which sounded ever so much like Golden Earring's '*Radar Love*'), it wasn't just Sunbeam who discarded her clothes. Soon there were one partially and three fully naked women on stage, and Prissy on drums, who was actually straight, had a boyfriend and never joined the others at a post-gig party. She was quite podgy and never showed much inclination to reveal any extra flesh at all.

As the men in the audience acknowledged with huge cheers, Sunbeam took the opportunity of the synth solo in '*Love Blouse*' to kiss Marsh Mallow full on the mouth, while Anita crawled across the floor and started licking her crotch in approximate rhythm to the pounding beat. From where she sat, Tabitha couldn't tell whether the sex was simulated or real, but she was sure that when Sunbeam stood astride Anita, Marsh Mallow fondling her breasts and the synth solo pounding away almost wholly on a pre-programmed loop, that it was real piss that came out between

her legs and splattered over Anita's face, bare breasts and short cropped hair.

It was only after two encores and another session of on-stage cunnilingus, this time with Carla receiving the pleasure of Anita's tongue, that Tabitha was at last able to confront Sunbeam, having first to push through a mob of mostly men who crowded outside the small changing room the pub supplied. She really didn't enjoy the ordeal of wriggling through the mass of black tee-shirts and leather jackets, with their studded tributes to bands like Limp Bizkit, Marilyn Manson and Rainbow, especially when she overheard one of them refer to her as a 'black bitch'.

Finally, she squeezed the changing room door behind her, drowning out the sound of the men and their banter with the huge bouncer who guarded the door, and looked over at Sunbeam who was only now covering her breasts with a tee-shirt emblazoned with the picture of a Moroccan minaret and sunrise.

"We've been told not to come back to the Fig," she told Sunbeam urgently.

"What the fuck! The ungrateful fuckers! Why's that?"

"Because you pissed on stage mostly. And Phil, the landlord, who I've known for years actually, said that his license doesn't cover all that... all the... you know..."

"Clitlicking."

"Yeah, that! And it's not just him. These three women, old fans of the band from way back, Piggy, Di and Grace, said they were disgusted, that they couldn't go to another gig by the group again, that you'd crossed the line from dyke irony to straightforward male-oriented pornography."

"Piggy, Di and Grace! Fucking prudish dykes. Who fucking cares about them!"

“Well, I do, Sunbeam. I care. They’re your audience. They’ve been loyal to the band since our first gigs in the basement of the Itchy Hamster. They say you’ve got like fucking Rockbitch.”

“Rockbitch! They’re just a load of fucking media whores. And anyway I don’t go for all that witching black magic stuff. You won’t see me stick a candle up my quim in a moonlit field. We were just having fun on stage, that’s all!”

“Well, look Sunbeam. I love you. I always have. I always will. But I can’t carry on being your manager if you continue doing what you’re doing.”

“What d’you mean? Doing what I’m doing?”

“Not just you. The whole band. Having sex on stage. I’m managing a rock group not a bunch of lap dancers.”

Tabitha then became aware that the rest of the band was watching her as she argued with Sunbeam.

“Don’t worry, Sunbeam. I’ll let you dance on my lap any day!” Carla sniggered.

“It was only a laugh, Tabby. It was nothing more,” Joanne protested.

“Don’t look at me! I didn’t do nothing!” asserted Prissy, towelling the sweat off her brow with a tubby hand.

If Tabitha thought she’d resolved the issue to her satisfaction, she was quite mistaken. From now on, the gigs were harder to get, but when she arranged them, they were attended by more and more people, and a greater and greater proportion of the audience consisted of men. And Tabitha had to find larger venues. Pubs were no longer big enough. And, for her, the final moment of irony must have been when she

actually got a gig at a converted cinema that for a while had also been a lap-dancing club, a period of its history enshrined in the name: The Pussy Parlour.

And the gigs got wilder and wilder. Only Prissy stayed out of the on-stage sex, which was now engulfing the music to the extent that less than half of Sunbeam's time on stage was spent playing the guitar or singing. Rather more was spent cavorting with the other girls, sometimes engaged in simulated intercourse, but on one memorable occasion, for a full fifteen minutes, for unsimulated three-way sex between Carla, Sticky Goo and Krakatoa, while Daffodil and Marsh Mallow kept up a rather monotonous rhythm in the background.

Tabitha told herself after every gig in which there was a further extension of the sexual license that had become an expected and inevitable part of the performance that this was it; that just one more repetition of this, just one more humiliating evening, watching the men in their Black Sabbath or Blue Oyster Cult tee-shirts crowd around Sunbeam, getting autographs signed on their penises or on their bottoms, with the prospect of once again tipping the cleaners a few extra quid to clean up the urine on the stage, that this time, most definitely this time, she would leave the group, even though she had no suggestion as to who should succeed her as manager. And this was despite the fact that she no longer had the time or the need to do her own gigs as a DJ. The split she got from the group's concerts was actually beginning to be worth something.

If it hadn't been for the recording offer, or, in fact, the several recording offers, from three major labels and five minors, Tabitha might well have left the group and foresworn a management career altogether. It was, after all, getting to be quite difficult

back at the house she still shared with Tom and Sunbeam. It had been a long time since she'd made love with Sunbeam, who was now proceeding through a frightening number of sexual partners, always more than one at the same time, of either sex, and both noisily and frequently. And it wasn't just the sexual partners. Her drug consumption was continuing to rise. Sunbeam's stake in the drug-dealing business now run by one of her new male friends was paying quite good dividends.

Tabitha's only compensation was her new relationship with Nikki, a DJ like herself, whose repertoire consisted mostly of drum & bass. Otherwise she would have had to spend rather more evenings under the same roof as Sunbeam and have to listen to her many and rather vocal cries of orgasmic pleasure.

Fame and fortune came to Excess very suddenly. It was almost overnight. The major record label with whom they'd chosen to sign wanted, in fact demanded, prompt returns on their investment. And a huge amount that was too. Only the background of a second class Business Studies degree steered Tabitha through all the negotiations, which she knew Sunbeam, especially in her current constant drug haze, would have been totally incompetent in handling. All those zeros on the cheques and the reams of small print on the contracts were enough to intoxicate anyone, but Tabitha knew she had the fortunes of five women riding on her level-headedness. Not to mention the roadies, the lighting engineer and the make-up assistants who were also now dependent on the financial fortunes of Excess.

But Tabitha knew inside herself that she was not really the right kind of person to manage Excess. Especially now, as only the merest sliver of radical lesbian ideology acted as a fig leaf for a rock group rather less famous for its uncompromising

sexual politics than for its sexual behaviour on stage, now filmed and displayed on huge overhead screens, and was, if anything, the more extreme as the group became more notorious. Although the interviews, for NME, Rolling Stone, Kerrang! and, rather more prestigiously, the Guardian, still gave Sunbeam plenty of opportunity to pontificate in the way she always did about the power of pussy and the gender revolution, no one, except perhaps the persistently naïve Joanne, really believed that what Excess was achieving really furthered any causes at all. Indeed, it took very little cynicism for Tabitha to admit that the rock group had rather more to do with porn than politics.

It was a very different venue that Tabitha attended on the last day of her rock management career. The auditorium was massive and sloped with a rake toward the front where, from the rear seats, the fans (mostly Dutch and Belgian as the band was on their first international tour) could see rather more on the huge overhead projections than they could of the pale pink naked dots on stage. There were no seats in the audience for Tabitha, who had to sit off-stage in the wings, perhaps grateful she couldn't see Sunbeam don her strap-on dildo and fuck one of the several guest performers who were now a regular part of the act. Nor could she see the musicians, excluding Prissy, indulge in the on-stage orgy in the ultimate number, the number one hit '*Relapse*', something she found rather troubling whenever she viewed the reaction from an audience that was now almost wholly male.

She waited a while after the show before she entered the changing rooms. She knew the girls would be excited by the gig and would probably already be working out who they would fuck in the after-gig party the record company had organised in the



Antwerp hotel. Not to mention chopping up lines of coke, heating up tin-foils of smack or rolling up huge spliffs. But she had to be careful not to leave it too late or her presence would be only distantly felt.

“Wow! That’s a pretty cool outfit you got on, Tabby sweetest!” remarked Sunbeam when Tabitha wandered into the changing room.

Tabitha smiled. At least Sunbeam was still lucid, although, judging by the kit in front of her, she’d soon be mainlining and, for a few minutes later, be quite disinclined to make any coherent observation at all. Of course, one benefit of the group’s improved fortunes was that Tabitha could afford to buy exactly the clothes she wanted to wear. Now that she had the choice, her taste was definitely toward the expensive tailored suit. It was as nothing compared to Sunbeam’s huge wardrobe of clothes and shoes. Not that there was much evidence of this on her person. Nor indeed on any of the other naked women in the changing room.

“I’ve got news for you, Sunbeam.”

“Whassat Tabby? Gig in Slovenia? Record company not happy with the follow-up to ‘*Relapse*’?”

“No, they’re quite happy with ‘*Love Blouse*’, though there’s a certain Dutch seventies rock group that’s threatening legal action. No, it’s nothing like that. And the next gig’s in Munich, exactly as planned. No, it’s about me.”

“Oh yeah!” said Sunbeam, almost instantly losing interest. “Hey, Sticky Goo Nita sweetheart, don’t you Bogart that joint!”

“Sif I would!” Carla replied, passing over a huge spliff, the roach still dripping with saliva.

“I’m no longer your manager, Sunbeam.”

“Whassat?” wondered Sunbeam, toking long and deep.

“I’m not going to be managing Excess any more.”

“Zat right?” Sunbeam slurred.

Tabitha wondered how much of what she was saying Sunbeam was actually taking in. Her drug consumption was now so great that her normal state of being was in some kind of narcotic high and it was relatively rare for there to be a great deal of coherence about her.

“You remember I spoke to Johnny Logan. Of course you do. Manager of the Racing Turds, Sonic Blue and Mary O’Connor.”

“Mary O’Connor. She’s a kind of Irish folkie, ain’t she?”

“Yes. Johnny Logan’s a top manager. He only deals with the big acts. He gets the huge multi-million dollar contracts. And he’ll represent anyone if they turn a profit. Johnny Logan’s not small fry like me.”

“Yeah. Mary O’Connor. She’s fucking naff. I like Sonic Blue. They’re good. I got their CD. They’re a bit like... Fuck! Who’re they like?”

“Don’t worry about them! I’m not going to be your manager any more. It’s going to be Johnny Logan. I signed you over. He’ll make you rich. Or richer. Richer than I ever could!”

Sunbeam nodded her head, but Tabitha wasn’t convinced she really understood what Tabitha had said. Especially when her next comment was: “Fuck! I know! They’re a bit like U2. Fucking Bono and that kind of shit. They’re fucking cool!”

“Well, you’re going to be working in the same stable as Sonic Blue now, Sunbeam. I’m not going to be managing you. Johnny Logan is.”

“Oh!” said Sunbeam. She looked momentarily confused. “So, where are you going?”

“I dunno, Sunbeam. I got a good deal from Johnny. More money than I ever thought possible. I might, you know, start a record label. Or open a record shop. You know, all the things we used to talk about doing.”

“Record label? Sounds like a good idea. That’s what we were gonna do, wasn’t it? So we wouldn’t ever sell out. We were gonna call it Pussy Power Records. That’s why I wrote that song. Remember!”

“Yes, I do!” smiled Tabitha, suddenly remembering another Sunbeam who she’d once known so well, one with whom she had sat at the back of the class, giggling and drawing naughty pictures on the back of the hand with a felt-tip pen. A Sunbeam who coughed and coughed when she tried out the cigarette she’d stolen off her father, and swore she’d never smoke again. Not the Sunbeam in front of her, who was carefully filling a syringe with smack and who had tied a pair of knickers around her upper arm as a makeshift tourniquet.

“*“Pussy Power! I’ve got a cunt. We’ve all got cunts. We’ve all got Pussy Power!”*” Sunbeam sang. And then she called out to Anita. “Hey! Keep a line of that stuff for me.”

“After or before you mainline?”

“Shit! Who fucking knows or cares!”

Tabitha smiled. She turned around and left the changing room, quite happy not

to have to find yet another excuse not to accompany Sunbeam to the party at the Antwerp Hotel and looking forward with more anticipation than she'd ever imagined toward her own room in the other hotel where Nikki was waiting for her.

And as every step took her further away from the changing room where Sunbeam was busily ingesting drugs and around which were gathered a huge crowd of adolescent men in their denim and heavy metal tee-shirts, it felt like more and more of a horrible weight and responsibility was at last being taken off her. She felt that when she would finally meet Nikki and the two of them would collapse as one mass of black and brown limbs that she would be so light and unencumbered that she would be able to flap her wings and fly.