



YOU DON'T KNOW ME TRILOGY

You Don't Know Me

Bonus Chapters from Dan's POV

A note to the reader

Hi!

Firstly, thank you for downloading these bonus chapters from Dan's point of view. I have to warn you there are spoilers in these chapters, so make sure you don't read them until you've finished the trilogy.

And thank you if you've read the trilogy. I really do appreciate your support!

So, onto the bonus chapters. I've written two chapters for each book in the trilogy, some of it overlapping with Maya's point of view, and some of it completely new. In case you're struggling to remember the story, I thought I'd give you a quick note on where each chapter falls in each book.

You Don't Know Me

- 1: From the very beginning of the book, this tells the story of their first meeting through Dan's eyes.
- 2: This fills in the blanks when Dan disappears for a few days after meeting Maya's sister, Sara.

True Colours

- 1: Dan takes a very drunk Maya home from Harrods.
- 2: This tells the story of the final chapter through Dan's eyes, when Maya visits him in hospital.

Shut Your Eyes

- 1: In this chapter, we find Dan in New York, preparing for his reunion with Maya.
- 2: Dan and Maya together, the morning their son is born.

Hope you enjoy!

Mandy Lee

You Don't Know Me

1

Seven thirty. Sunlight spilled across the rooftops a couple of hours ago, and now the cool touch of dawn recedes under the heat of another June day. Leaning against the parapet, I sip my coffee and take in the scene: a jogger heading south along the Albert Embankment; a speedboat threading its way downriver; the Houses of Parliament, ghostly pale in the early morning light. I close my eyes and rub my forehead, wishing the raging headache would back off. But the paracetamol haven't kicked in yet, and when they do, I doubt they'll make much difference. After a weekend holed up here, downing whisky after whisky, doing my best to blot out the past, I've only got myself to blame. I'll just have to deal with the consequences.

With a final sip of coffee, I head back inside, abandoning the mug on the counter top next to the open briefcase, the piles of untouched paperwork ... and the one personnel file I brought home at the end of last week. When it first landed on my desk, late on Friday afternoon, I froze at the sight of the name printed on the front: Maya Scotton. A quick look through the information confirmed my suspicion. She shared the same home town as me – Limmingham – and grew up on the same road. There was no doubt about it. Sara Scotton's sister had fallen firmly into my sights.

I'm ashamed of it all now, those first reactions. The onslaught of unwanted memories knocking me off balance and opening wounds, dragging all manner of pain, anger and frustration back to the surface. Perhaps it was no wonder logic became a stranger, leaving me to flounder in a wave of irrational questions. Why was she here? Did she know who I was? Had she tracked me down on purpose? And if so, what did she want? The madness quickly burgeoned, offering up a surprise: the notion of revenge. After all, here was a link to my childhood tormentor, an opportunity I could use. I'm just relieved I managed to pull myself back from the brink with a reminder. I'd paid good money to bury the path from Limmingham to the South Bank. There was no way Maya Scotton could have traced me. Her appearance in my world had to be coincidence, pure and simple ... and I'd do nothing with it.

Unable to resist temptation, I pick up the file again, flip it open and skim back through the details. As if I need to. I've already committed the lot to memory. Limmingham Primary. East Norfolk Secondary. Edinburgh School of Art, graduating with honours. And then four years of nothing – a gap she can only explain on the application form as 'in a relationship' – before she took a secretarial course and ended up on my doorstep. It was the mention of art that piqued my interest, driving me to make a couple of calls before I left work. It didn't take much to contact her tutor, and he remembered her well. Oils. Landscapes. A picture sold to an Edinburgh gallery. Huge talent, never fulfilled. Tapping the counter top, I glance out of the window and wonder, yet again, why this woman never pursued her dreams. And yet again, I return to my initial theory: maybe it was down to her sister, a girl with a natural talent for destroying self-worth. I have no idea if I'm remotely close to the mark, but somewhere between Friday afternoon and Monday morning, Maya Scotton evolved from threat to puzzle. And she's a puzzle I need to work out.

So, what to do next?

I could always leave her down in Finance, consign the past to where it belongs. Our paths would rarely cross and if they did, I doubt I'd even recognise her. But I know I could never do that, because her very presence in the building would eat me alive. I want to dig further. I want to close those open wounds. I need to see her,

meet her ... and confront this. All of which will be far easier, and much less obvious to everyone else, if she's in Norman's office. Decision made, I close the file, pick up my mobile and call Mrs Kavanagh.

'Mr Foster?' She sounds sleepy.

'Sorry to bother you so early.'

'That's fine.' The rustling of sheets. Mumbled words in the background. She must be with the husband.

'We have a new employee starting today. Scotton.'

'Erm ... Yes ... Maya Scotton.'

'I'd liked her moved to Norman's office.'

A brief silence ensues. Mrs Kavanagh's obviously confused, but she shouldn't be. After all these years, she ought to be used to my ways.

'But she's down to work in Finance.'

'I know, and I've been thinking about it. Move Norman's current secretary to Finance. Give her some real work to do. And put Miss Scotton in Norman's office. Try her out there first.'

'Okay.'

'Give Norman a quick call before work. Forewarn him.' I pause. 'And Elspeth?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Don't let Miss Scotton know this was my doing.'

Wondering what the hell's going on, I end the call and stare at my mobile. If I'm not very much mistaken, I seem to be obsessing over someone who may as well be a complete stranger and micro-managing secretarial staff. I must be losing my marbles. Perhaps a walk is in order. It might just shift the hangover and clear my head. And if I time it right, I'll catch my first glimpse of Maya Scotton in reception.

After glugging down a glass of water, I sort the briefcase, and leave. It's a good forty-minute walk along the South Bank – one I've taken a hundred times – but while I'd usually admire the scenery, this morning I pay no attention. Sunlight plays across the river as I pass one landmark after another, mechanically following the route. And with each step, I spiral further into the dark, brain hijacked by an endless stream of unwanted visions repeating themselves over and over again. A mattress. Filthy clothes. Cold eyes and harsh words. Laughing faces. Snide comments. The back of a hand. A fist. Utter and complete isolation ...

When I finally reach Fosters, I'm ready to keel over, in desperate need of hydration and in a seriously vile mood. But now, thankfully, there's now only one thing on my mind. Pausing outside, I check the time. Ten to nine. Perfect. Within seconds, I've passed through the revolving doors and I'm moving quickly across the lobby. I glance to the right, checking out reception, wondering if that's her wearing a ridiculously short skirt and bending over the desk. It has to be. I only glimpse her for a few seconds but inexplicably, the sight of her backside leaves me with the beginnings of a hard-on. I don't look back as I enter the lift. I daren't risk it. Instead, I punch the button, eager to retreat to the safety of my office.

Carla greets me with a wary smile. 'Morning, sir.'

'Get me a couple of energy drinks.' I head straight for my office.

'Er ... yes, sir.'

'Coffee first.'

'Yes, sir. The Tyneside documents are on your desk.'

I pause in the doorway. 'As soon as Norman gets in, I want him up here.' And that's enough interaction. Slamming the door behind me, I settle in for a morning of serious catching-up.

By the time Norman arrives, just after ten, I've managed to deal with half the papers I should have read over the weekend, downed two energy drinks and three coffees, and brushed my teeth twice. It's left me feeling slightly more human, but no less ill-tempered.

Carla shows him in.

I get up and move out from behind my desk.

'Mr Foster,' he beams, waddling towards me.

'How many times?' I waft Carla away and close the door. 'Will you drop the Mr Foster thing?'

'But it's not right at work. I keep telling you. In front of other people, you've got to maintain a persona.'

'Everyone knows we're friends.'

'It doesn't matter. There's still a line you don't cross in company.' He squints at me. 'Why are you going on about this again? Are you ill?'

'No.'

'You look a bit peaky.'

'Bad night's sleep.'

'I don't like you staying at that flat over the weekend.'

'I can look after myself, Norman. Grown man now.'

He doesn't seem convinced. 'You still need Betty's cooking.'

'And sometimes I need time to myself.' I force a smile. 'How's the report going?'

'Being typed as we speak.'

'A bit late, isn't it?' I check my watch. 'The meeting's this afternoon.'

He rubs his chin. 'It'll be ready ... Oh, I've got to nip out this morning. Betty wants a few things from the market, and I can't get them later. So ...'

'Just be back in time.' I falter. I've been a little snappy so far, and I don't want to take anything out on Norman. I need to change my approach. 'How's Jodie doing?' I ask, trying to soften my voice.

'Still mad at you. I told her. You have an hour for lunch, just like everyone else.'

'She's got to learn.'

'You can't go off shopping for three hours solid, I said. That's why he's docked your pay.'

'Not that she earns it.' I grimace. There's only so long I can babysit Norman's granddaughter. 'Has she sorted this course yet?'

'We're onto it.'

'Good.' I return to my desk and sit down, reminding myself to give nothing away. I can't have Norman making any links. After all, he knows where I came from. 'So ... your new secretary?'

'Maya?'

'Yes.'

'I don't get it.' He frowns. 'Paula was just settling in.'

'Finance needed someone who's on the ball. And Miss Scotton, well, it looks like her first secretarial job.' And now for a seemingly innocent question. 'Have you seen her file yet?'

'No. I've only just got in.'

'Don't bother yourself with it. She's a good fit. What's she like?'

'Lovely. Very lovely. Maybe a little nervous.'

Nervous? Nothing like her sister then. And maybe my theory's correct. I don't know why, but suddenly I feel a little protective over our new employee, and before I can do anything about it, I say something stupid. 'Look after her.'

‘I will.’ Norman’s frown deepens. ‘Are you coming home next weekend?’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ I pick up a pen.

‘Good.’ He moves to the door, and hesitates. ‘I’ve been working hard on the kitchen garden.’

‘You have?’ I think of it now, my favourite place in the world, which Norman is completely aware of. And that’s why he’s mentioning it. I’m in a mood, and he wants to remind me what’s important in life. I let out a breath. ‘How are the sweet peas?’ I ask.

‘Doing well.’ His eyes brighten. ‘You should see them. They’re blooming.’

By 11.55 I can’t take it any longer. Knowing she’s only one floor below, intrigue gets the better of me. I pick up the phone, put it down, stare at it, pick it up again, and then key in her extension. It rings for an age.

Finally, she answers. ‘Mr ... er Norman’s office. Can I help you?’

First contact. A honeyed voice, all smooth and soft, with just the right amount of sweetness. It sends a shiver down my spine ... and that riles me. A hard-on, and now a shiver? Let’s not fucking complicate this.

‘You took your time,’ I growl.

‘Sorry?’

What to say next? I have no idea.

‘Hello?’

I’d better play the idiot. ‘Who is this?’

‘Maya Scotton.’

‘Maya Scotton,’ I repeat her name, slowly, trying it out loud for the first time. ‘You’re the new girl in Norman’s office.’

‘Actually, I’m the new secretary in Norman’s office.’

And now, for some reason, I’m not riled any more. In fact, I’m biting back a grin. She’s standing her ground, and I seem to like it. This is worth pushing further. ‘Like I said, the new girl.’

‘I’m twenty-six,’ she says. ‘And I think that entitles me to be called a woman. Do you actually want anything?’

Definitely standing her ground. Nothing like the usual women in my life: all doe-eyed, submissive and dull.

‘Yes, I do.’

More silence. And then she sighs.

‘Well, would you actually like to tell me what it is that you want? Only my psychic abilities are a little off today.’

The grin’s back, and I give it free rein. After all, this is fun. If she wants to lock horns, game on.

‘I’m sorry to hear that, Miss Scotton. Now, I understand you’ve typed up a report this morning. Would you be a good woman and email a copy up to me?’

I slam down the phone. That should do it. Any minute now, she’ll realise who she’s just been rude to. And then she’ll squirm with embarrassment. Deciding I’ve just won the first round, I laugh quietly to myself and wonder if I’ll get an apology.

It’s nearly two o’clock and Norman’s still not here.

‘We can do this without him,’ someone says.

Of course we can. I’ve already analysed the facts and figures. I know the inevitable outcome of this meeting: the Tyneside factory’s turning a loss, and I can’t have it threatening the organisation. My decision’s made. We’re simply going through the motions now. And after all Norman’s done for me, it’s the least I can do in return: keeping him involved in the company he loves, giving him the sense he’s still needed.

‘I’ll call him.’ I get up, take off my jacket and throw it onto a sofa. Enjoying the cool of the air conditioning, I roll up my shirt sleeves, head for the phone and key in Norman’s contact.

‘Hello?’

‘You’re back.’

‘Yes, I’m here.’

‘Have you forgotten the meeting?’

‘I’ll be up in a minute ... I had to get some bits.’

‘Yes, I know.’ And then it happens. A mad idea. ‘Listen, I want you to bring the new secretary up with you.’

He hesitates. ‘Yes.’

‘I think she’ll benefit from being here.’

Another hesitation. ‘Okay.’

‘Make sure you bring her.’

And another. ‘Yes, I’ll do that.’

Ending the call, I stand by the window ... and wait. While I look out over the river, the discussion continues behind me, mulling over the cost of redundancies, possible relocations, the impact on pensions. The conversation lulls, and my heartbeat quickens, because that can only mean one thing: Norman’s here. Right now, he’ll be squeezing himself into one of the two spaces left around the table. I can only hope he’s not next to me.

‘So you finally made it, Norman?’ I ask, doing my best to sound calm. I’m about to face the puzzle. I need to put on a show.

‘Sorry, Mr Foster. I was waylaid.’

For fuck’s sake, he’s at it again. ‘Dan. Call me Dan.’

‘Sorry, Dan.’

I turn slowly, and search her out.

The instant I find her, I’m completely undone. It’s the emerald eyes that snare me first, vibrant and bewitching, examining me closely. I could get lost in them for hours. Somehow, I manage to break the spell and take in the rest of Miss Scotton: the long blonde hair, obviously wayward but tied up at the moment; a perfect face, adorned with minimal make-up; full lips, parted slightly, just begging to be kissed. And God, that blouse. Flimsy, white, with a low neckline, it’s far too tight. She blushes now. Her lips redden. My hard-on kicks back into life, and I’m thinking of her in my bed, thoroughly restrained and groaning under my touch. This is physical attraction on a grand scale, rendering me a total fucking mess. I can only hope the façade’s holding up. Shaking myself into action, I approach the table and take my seat, right next to her.

‘Miss Scotton.’

Her eyes glint in the sun.

‘Maya Scotton. Welcome to the organisation.’ Shit. That sounded distinctly sarcastic. Assuming a poker face, I clamp my lips together and harden my eyes.

‘Thank you, Mr Foster.’

Oh God, that voice. I want to hear it begging me to make her come.

'It was nice talking to you earlier.'

She remains silent. And I'm not surprised. By now, she must think I'm a complete and utter bastard, hardly worth bothering with. There's only saving grace in all of this: I'm sure the attraction's working both ways, because I'm certainly seeing the signs – shallow breaths, flushed cheeks, a tiny vein pulsating in her throat – and it's definitely worth investigating further. But for now, I'll give her a break, and take one for myself while I'm at it. With a shrug, I fix my attention on the iPad in front of me and flip through a series of deathly dull documents.

'So, Norman, you need to fill us in on the latest figures for Tyneside.'

'I do, Mr Foster.'

Jesus, not again. 'Dan.'

'Yes, Dan. Well, I've come up with the following ...'

While Norman speaks, I decide it's time for some clarification. Laying my left hand on the table, palm down, I send her a little message. Not married. Available, if you're interested. She spots the hand, and it does the job. Clearly oblivious to the fact I'm watching her every move, she begins to investigate me, eyes travelling up my arm, to my neck, and finally arriving at my face. Caught in the act, she gives a start and turns away quickly. And then, for no apparent reason, she picks up a glass of water, aims for her mouth and tips the whole lot down that wonderful cleavage.

'So ... to ... to sum up,' Norman stutters. 'In the current market, I'm afraid there's simply no hope.'

'That settles it then,' I murmur, gazing at the wet patch on her chest. 'We'll shut it down.'

She chokes quietly. I seem to have surprised her.

'Norman,' I press on, 'you're in charge of liaison.' Because he'll bring sympathy and good grace to a difficult situation.

'Of course.'

I check on Miss Scotton again, only to find those beautiful eyes filled with disgust ... and it bothers me. But why does it bother me? That's the question. Trying to gather my thoughts, I glance down at the iPad before I dare to resume eye contact. And when I do, I register a sudden warmth in my chest, a trip in the heartbeat, a rush of blood through the veins. This woman seems to be causing all sorts of mayhem – physical and mental – and she's now looking at me as if I'm the Devil incarnate ... and I'm still bothered. Suddenly, I feel a need to regain the upper hand.

'So, tell me Miss Scotton. What's your opinion on the matter?' That should do it. Put her firmly in her place.

'Me?'

'Yes. You.'

'I ... er ...'

She seems confused, and I'm not surprised. I'm half-expecting her to get up and make a dash for it. Instead, with a shaking hand, she puts down her glass.

I tap the table. 'We haven't got all day, Miss Scotton.'

Norman coughs. 'Maya's a secretary, Mr Foster.'

'Dan,' I remind him. And yes, I'm aware of Miss Scotton's position in the company. And fuck it, I shouldn't have involved her, because God knows what the rest of the room are thinking now.

'Sorry. Dan. Maya's a secretary and she's only just started to work here. I don't think it's very fair to ask for her opinion.'

Quite right. But my brain's gone on the rampage. 'Why not? I'd like to know what everyone thinks.'

'You're going too far,' Norman mutters.

Of course I am. But I can't stop. And suddenly, I don't give a damn what the rest of the room are thinking.

'Well?' I demand.

'I ... er ... I ...'

'Surely you have an opinion, Miss Scotton.'

'I ... I do. But I'm not sure it's of any use.'

'I'd like to hear it, whether it's of any use or not.' I lay a hand on the table, right in front of her, marking my ground, good and proper.

'Well ...' she says, her voice uneven with nerves. 'If you close down the factory, then that's two hundred and twenty-five jobs down the drain.' She looks at Norman. 'That's two hundred and twenty-five families affected by the closure, and that will have a terrible effect on the community.' While she stares out of the window, complete silence takes hold of the office. Narrowing her eyes, she picks up her glass and puts it down again.

'Thank you, Miss Scotton.' I get to my feet and retreat to the window. All I know is I need to put some distance between myself and Norman's new secretary, because she's like some class A narcotic: highly addictive and totally destructive. A few minutes in her delicious company and I'm making a complete dog's dinner of everything. 'A pithy summary of the effects of our decision. Two hundred and twenty-five jobs. Two hundred and twenty-five families. Just think of all those lives that are about to be ruined.' And I *am* thinking of them, believe me. 'Unfortunately, the factory isn't turning a profit. It's turning a loss. A huge, fuck-up of a loss. We'll close it. You all know what you need to do. Get on with it.'

Wishing I could just escape from here, take a ride on the bike and clear my thoughts, I gaze out of the window, waiting for the lot of them to leave me alone. A minute or so later, Norman's voice rouses me: 'I have some matters to discuss with you, Dan.'

I turn to face him.

And fuck it, she's still here.

'Not now.' Because I'm incapable of rational thought.

'But ...'

'Off you go, Norman. And you, Miss Scotton, I'd like a word please.' What? Why did I say that? This isn't distance. Seriously tempted to bang my head against the window, I wait for Norman to leave before I fumble for something else to say. 'So, it's your first day here?' That'll have to do.

I circle to the opposite side of my desk, place a finger on the glass top and fix my eyes on her. Another dose of Maya Scotton. Immediately, I'm dragged back into sexual chaos.

'Yes. It is.' She examines me again.

'And how are you finding it?'

'Interesting.'

'I'm glad to hear it.' I look down at her skirt. Way too short. Good God, if I could, I'd have her over this desk in an instant. 'I kept you behind, Miss Scotton, because there are a couple of things I'd like you to know.' Which are? I have no idea. She clearly thinks she's about to be sacked. Perhaps I should tell her there's nothing to worry about. Or maybe suggest it. Yes, that's it. I'll be the caring boss,

give her a little reminder to sort out her blouse and preserve her dignity. 'The first thing is that your blouse is soaking wet.'

She swallows. 'I know that, Mr Foster, but thank you for reminding me.'

'No problem.'

'And the second thing?'

I tap my finger, distinctly turned on. I'd like to tell her the outline of her nipples is on show, and it's making me want to do no end of filthy, kinky things to her ... but that would be truly out of order.

'Well, it's sort of linked to my first thing, really.' I point at her chest. 'I can see your bra.' And now I'm grinning. Why the fuck am I grinning? That's not supposed to happen.

'I'll ... sort it out.'

She turns on her heels and leaves. I watch her backside disappear through the doorway, and wince with embarrassment. And then I shake my head in disbelief. If I'm not much mistaken, I've just got hooked – big style. And at the same time, I've shown myself up as the biggest dickhead in history. Jesus, that was sexual harassment, wasn't it? She'll be out of here like a shot.

'Bollocks.' On automatic pilot, I pick up the phone and press the security button. 'Dave.'

'Mr F.'

Something tells me I need more of that woman, and I'll just have to deal with the chaos. There's no way I'm letting her run. 'Would you be interested in a bonus?'

'Of course.'

'Then get yourself up here now.'

'What's it about?'

I have no idea. That's what I'd actually like to say. 'A little internal espionage. I want to track an employee ... closely.'

'Sounds interesting.'

'It is. And you'd better keep it to yourself.'

Glass in hand, slumped in a corner of the spare room, I stare at the spanking bench. Ordered on Monday – when I still had hope – along with the St Andrew's cross, the paints and canvases, it arrived earlier today. And now I should send it back. Because as the days have dragged on, I've gradually come to my senses.

Not for the first time, I think back to Sunday afternoon, and Sara Scotton's sudden reappearance in my life: a real shock to the system, a timely reminder that sooner or later the truth *will* hunt me down. Even now, I can see her eyes. Filled with intrigue, examining me closely, finding something strangely familiar yet undefinable. It's only a matter of time before she makes the link. And once Maya finds out who I really am – once she realises I deceived her – there's no way she's going to stick around.

I take a sip of whisky, pick up my mobile and open Maya's text, reading it for the hundredth time:

No more running.

'You have no idea,' I mutter. 'No idea what I'm running from.' And that's the real issue. Even if she were to forgive me, even if we did take this further, there's no escaping history. Wherever I go, I cause hurt. Logic tells me I'm just not good enough for her. It tells me to stay away. And in spite of this ache inside, that's exactly what I plan to do.

I'm about to take another mouthful of whisky when the intercom buzzes. Glass halfway to my mouth, I freeze. My stomach lurches. Could that be her? Has she finally decided to confront me? I sincerely hope not, seeing as I'm on my fourth glass, and in no fit state to face her right now. Lowering the glass, I wait for my unseen visitor to piss off. But the intercom buzzes again, and again ... and again.

'For fuck's sake.'

Grabbing the phone, I stagger to my feet and make my way downstairs, aiming for the front door. By the time I reach the intercom, it's buzzed another three times, and my heart's thudding. I stare at the unit, willing it to remain silent. When it doesn't, I press the concierge button.

'Yes?'

'Mr Watson's here to see you.'

I let out a breath of relief, and almost relax. 'I said no one.'

'He's pretty insistent.'

'Tell him to go away.' I touch my forehead against the wall.

The concierge's voice becomes muffled. 'He said to go away.'

And now Clive's voice, also muffled: 'Tell him I'm not going anywhere. Tell him I'll stay here all night if I have to. And while you're at it, tell him he's a stupid git.'

'He said ...'

'I heard.' I cut off the concierge in mid-flow and bang my head against the wall. I know my friend only too well. He won't back off until he's had his way. 'Fine. Let him up.'

Waiting by the lift, it's my full intention to tell Clive to get lost before he can even step over the threshold. When the doors slide open, I get on with job in hand. 'Fuck off.'

'Evening, misery guts.' Swinging a takeaway bag in his right hand, he walks straight past me.

'What part of fuck off don't you understand?' I turn and follow him into the apartment, watching him set the bag on the counter top.

'Both parts.'

‘Just go.’ I motion to the open door.

He shakes his head. ‘You need to eat.’ Rummaging through the bag, he pulls out a variety of containers.

‘I can feed myself. Been doing it for years.’

‘I’ve brought Chinese. Eat some of this, and then I’ll go.’

‘Is that a promise?’

‘I’m a man of my word.’

Kicking the door shut, I take a place at the opposite side of the counter, dumping my glass and mobile on the top while Clive arranges the meal.

‘Duck pancakes. Egg fried rice. Sweet and sour chicken. Noodles.’ He withdraws to the cupboards, helping himself to plates and cutlery. ‘Drinking again?’

‘Looks like it.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t.’ Returning to the counter, he sets out the plates and cutlery. ‘You’re not a fun drunk.’ He pulls lids from containers, picks up a spoon and divides the rice between two plates. ‘In fact, you’re a miserable-as-shit drunk, especially on that stuff.’ He nods to the whisky.

‘Want one?’

‘No, thanks.’ He dishes out the sweet and sour chicken. ‘Knock it on the head, Dan. Carla says you’ve looked like shit all week. How much have you been drinking?’

I don’t reply. I’m not about to tell him I’ve downed a bottle a night since I last saw Maya.

‘It’s time to sort your shit out.’ He piles shredded duck on top of the rice. ‘I’ve left you to stew long enough. All this self-pity: it’s not good for you.’

‘Self-pity? When have I ever suffered from that?’

With a shrug, he slips a couple of pancakes on top of my duck. ‘That time you came second in the county sports high jump.’ He locates the tub of hoisin sauce and nudges it in front of me. ‘You were fucking inconsolable. That was self-pity. And you’re definitely suffering from it now.’

I gaze at the chicken. The very sight of it turns my stomach. I can’t remember the last time I ate. ‘It’s not self-pity. I just don’t want to think. And I’m not hungry.’

‘I don’t care. You’re going to eat.’ Picking up another spoon, he shovels a mound of noodles onto my plate. ‘And you’re going to think.’ He picks up a fork and thrusts it at me. ‘I’m not leaving until you’ve finished the lot. So, you’d better make a start.’

‘Not hungry.’

‘Not leaving.’

We take a few moments to stare each other out, before I accept the fork. I want Clive Watson out of my flat and if a few mouthfuls of sweet and sour is all it takes, then I’d say it’s worth the effort. As soon as I begin to eat, I realise I *am* hungry. In fact, I’m bloody ravenous. And it’s highly likely I’ll polish off the whole lot. Leaving me to get on with it, Clive fetches a couple of bottles of water from the fridge and digs into his own food. Minutes pass in silence and when he speaks again, broaching the subject he obviously came here to discuss, we’ve both almost cleared our plates.

‘I saw Lucy last night.’

I shrug.

‘Maya isn’t handling this too well. You know she handed in her resignation today?’

‘Yep.’

He frowns. ‘That’s all you can say?’

'Yep.' I put down my fork, ignore the water and take a sip of whisky.

'Apparently, she's locked herself away ... painting.'

'Good. I'm glad.' Because at least she's finding herself again.

Clive watches me for a moment. 'It was only a matter of time before you met her.'

'I take it you're referring to Sara?'

'Of course.'

'I should never have told you ...'

'But you did.' He helps himself to a pancake, smears it with sauce and fills it with duck and cucumber. 'I know it's hard.' He rolls the pancake into a parcel and takes a bite. 'I know Sara brings back the past, and God knows what that reminds you of.'

'Everything.'

None of which should come as a surprise. After all, Clive knows the story of Limmingham ... up to a point.

'So, is that why you dumped Maya?'

'No.'

'Are you going to elaborate?'

I push out a breath. 'Alright. Sara's going to recognise me. She's already halfway there.'

'And?' He takes another bite of pancake.

I ignore the prompt.

'You're a fucking idiot.'

'Tell me something new.'

'All you need to do is get in there first. Own up to the truth.'

I give him a cold smile. 'It's not that easy.'

'Do you know why it's not that easy?'

'Of course.' Because if I'm to have any sort of life with Maya, I need to give her complete honesty. And that means unloading it all – Rome, Limmingham, the lot – a sorry catalogue of destruction and misery, all of it caused by me. And Clive's right. I'm a fucking idiot. A fucking idiot for ever believing this could work.

'It's because you're in love.'

I finish off the whisky, get up and fetch the bottle from a cupboard. He's telling me nothing I don't already know. 'You think?'

'Of course.'

I pour another glass and sit back down. 'Love.' Undefined and unfathomable. Stripping away all reason, it leaves you gasping for breath. 'I thought I wasn't capable of that.'

'You're capable of anything.' His eyes twinkle with mischief. 'And you are, aren't you? I mean, in love?'

Of course I am. Because somewhere between that first glimpse of her backside and dropping her off in Camden, I lost myself completely.

'Never thought I'd see the day.' With a laugh, Clive finishes off the pancake. 'I bet you thought it was a virus.'

'Very funny.'

'Fuzzy head, churning stomach, tripping heart.'

'You can stop now.'

'I've got news for you, my friend. That's love. And in this particular case, I'm afraid to say it's incurable. A lifelong condition. Only treatable with a regular daily dose of Maya Scotton.'

While he sets about preparing a second pancake, I watch him in silence. He's right again. I'll never get over Maya. This ache inside ... it's going to haunt me forever.

‘Houston,’ he says, admiring his handiwork, ‘we have a problem. Daniel Foster, International Man of Mystery, is in love with a woman who doesn’t know his true identity. Please advise. What do we do about it?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing?’

‘She’s better off without me.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s complicated. I should have listened to you. You warned me to leave her alone.’

‘Which you managed for one entire night.’ He puts down the pancake, leans forward, and becomes serious. ‘Listen, my friend. I did my best to keep you two apart, but it was a mistake. I told you that. The night your car was impounded, I saw it in both of you: you’re totally meant for each other.’

My thoughts head back to Friday evening. An abandoned car. Seven Dials. The necklace. A visit to Isaac’s club. That night, Maya caught a glimpse of my past, and she was willing to understand. And because of that, I believed we *were* totally meant for each other. Closing my eyes, I’m back in her bedroom now, holding her close while she drifts off to sleep in my arms. And then, out of nowhere, I’m standing in some god forsaken alleyway, staring down at a dying man ...

‘What if I’m like him?’ I ask. ‘Deep down inside?’

We both know who I’m talking about.

‘I’m sure you’re nothing like him.’

‘He hurt people.’ I look at Clive.

‘You’ve never hurt anyone, not on purpose, not out of malice.’

‘Still ...’

‘Still what?’

‘He ... controlled my mother. Controlled me.’

‘Oh, I get it.’ Clive nods. ‘You’re a control freak. But there are different types of control, Dan. I’ve never known you use it to make someone miserable, and it certainly *doesn’t* come from your childhood.’

‘It has to.’

‘Why? You weren’t like that before you fucked off to Europe.’ He unscrews the top of his water bottle. ‘Whatever happened there – and I know you’re never going to tell me – my money’s on that being the root cause of this control thing.’

He swigs down a few mouthfuls of water, and I sense an increase in my heartbeat, a surge in my pulse. Anger’s on the rise, because he’s in forbidden territory. We don’t ever mention that time in my life. It’s an unspoken rule, and he knows it. So why is he dragging it up now? He’ll only earn himself another black eye.

‘Ever heard of King Canute?’ he asks.

‘Hilarious.’

‘You can’t control everything.’

‘Since when did you become so wise?’ My hands ball into fists.

‘I’ve always been wise.’ Ignoring the warning signs, he smiles. ‘I just never let on. You want more wisdom?’

‘No.’

‘Well, you’re getting some. All that control shit? It’s not you. It’s just a coping mechanism. That’s my take on it. You need it because somewhere along the way, you lost yourself. And whatever went on in Rome, *that’s* where it happened.’

He knows nothing. By the time I fetched up in Rome, I was already lost ... because I’d killed a man. I squeeze my eyes shut and see him again. The blood. The

crumpled body. The eyes, begging for help. I pick up my glass and gulp down a mouthful of whisky. Oblivion can't come soon enough.

'But you know what?' Clive presses on. 'Maya found you again. And she brought you back.' He belches and pats his stomach. 'Lily says you're changing back into who you used to be, and I have to say I agree.'

'Good for you.'

'Now, any period of change brings with it some degree of chaos ...'

'The thoughts of Chairman Clive.' I grimace.

'That's why you're such a mess.'

'I'm not a mess.'

'Oh yes you are. Everyone's noticed. That meeting you hauled her up to? Apparently, you made a grand prick of yourself there. Wish I'd seen it. And you're making shit decisions too ... like fixing up ridiculous redundancy pay-outs.'

'We've been over that.' I slam down the glass. Any more of this, and I'm going to blow.

'And ending it with Maya. Shit decision.'

'I can't hurt her again.'

'Oh, fuck off. Just tell her the truth and get it over with.'

'She'll run a mile.' The fists tighten again. Muscles twitch.

'The only woman who's ever turned your head. The only woman you've ever fallen for. Are you really going to let her go without a fight? You'll never find another woman like her.'

'I know.'

'So, this is what you want? Going back to what you were before? Going back to the club? To Claudine? You want to go back to being lonely?'

And now he's pushed too far.

'No,' I growl, banging my fists on the table and letting out the truth. 'I don't want to go back to that life. I hated that life. I want Maya. No one else. I want to spend the rest of my fucking life with her.' I lower my head. 'Jesus.'

I need a moment, and he knows it. He bides his time before the next move.

'She's in love with you, Dan.'

I look up, forehead creased into a frown. 'She said that?' Because I can't imagine it's true. How could any woman love a fucked-up mess like me?

'Lucy told me.' Getting to his feet, Clive wipes his mouth on a serviette. 'And she knows Maya better than anyone. So if you thought it was just a fling for her, something you could walk away from with minimal damage, you're wrong.' He pauses, letting it all sink in. 'She's in love with you, and she'll hear you out, and forgive you ... whatever you've done.' He pauses again. 'And if you do walk away from this, you'll prove one thing: you're a total fucking coward.' He drops the serviette and brushes his hands. 'And a complete shit.'

'That's two things.'

'Let's not split hairs.'

With a smile, he sets about clearing away the remnants of the meal. While he dumps the leftovers in the bin and loads the dishwasher, I rake back through the last few days with Maya – the most confusing, frustrating, spectacularly wonderful days of my life. Instant, overpowering attraction topped off with an insanely perfect connection ... and yes, love.

I gaze at the glass of whisky, and then the bottle of water. It's a simple enough choice: misery and oblivion on the left; clarity and purity on the right. Blot it out and forget, or sober up and fight. It doesn't take me long to realise I've been a fool. I *am*

nothing like my step-father, and whatever I've done in the past, I'm not likely to do it again. Because I *have* changed. With a deep breath, I push the whisky away and draw the water towards me. This isn't going to be easy, but some things are worth fighting for, no matter how painful. I'll do my best to win her back. And then, when the time's right, I'll put the truth right into her hands ... where it should be. She can use it to make or break me. At least that way, I've tried.

'Who said love's easy?' Clive smiles from across the kitchen.

'So, I tell her the truth.'

'What else can you do?' He returns to the counter and lays out a plan. 'Today's Wednesday. Take tomorrow to sort yourself out. And then, on Friday, we'll go to the exhibition. She'll be surrounded by punters, so she'll have to rein it in. That'll give you a chance to work your Foster magic on her.' He takes a breath. 'Now, I know this doesn't come naturally, but trust me, you also need to take it slowly. Maybe ask her out for a drink, a romantic dinner, something like that. Do *not* take her straight back home and fuck her senseless.'

'Advice taken.'

He picks up my mobile. 'The Steves are worried, by the way. Convinced you're about to pull out of the sale. They're even sounding out alternative buyers.'

'I'm not pulling out.'

'Then reassure them. You don't want Slaters slipping out of your hands.' He offers me the phone.

I take it and key in Big Steve's contact.

He answers quickly. 'Dan?'

'Hi. Yes.' I rub my forehead. 'About Friday.'

'The exhibition?'

'Yes.' I glance at Clive. 'It's just to say I'm still coming.'

'You are?' Big Steve falters. 'But Lucy tells me you and Maya ...'

'We've had a little trouble,' I interrupt. 'That's all. I'm onto it.'

'Okay.'

'Listen. Don't tell Maya I'm coming. Or Lucy.'

'Okay.' Another pause. 'And the sale?'

'Still on.'

'So, can we go public?'

'You can say it's on. Just don't let anyone know it's me buying. Not yet.'

'Understood. Mum's the word.'

'And Steve?'

'Uh huh?'

'I've got something else to ask.'

'Fire away.'

'Maya's painting. The trees.'

'Oh, it's wonderful, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is ... and I want it. Whatever anyone offers, I'll double the money. Just make sure it's mine.'

True Colours

1

'I'm telling you. I don't like shopping. I always buy the wrong thing. It makes me all sweaty.'

'I get that now.'

Halting at the top of the staircase, she squints at a rail of dresses. 'I like combats. Nice and simple.'

'I know, but just try out the new clothes.'

'You're not telling me how to dress.'

I get it. That's what Boyd did, and now she's afraid I'm going to do the same. She needs to understand I'm not that kind of man. 'Certainly not.' I take her gently by the arm. 'Try them out. If you don't like them, go back to combats. You could dress in a sack for all I care.'

With no idea where I'm going, I begin to guide her down the stairs.

'A sack?' She stops again, half way down, and pulls away.

'What I'm saying is this, Maya.' I draw her back to me. 'I adore you, utterly and completely, whatever you're wearing. Got it?'

She seems to think for a moment, and then she nods. 'Got it.'

'I just thought you might enjoy a treat. I thought women were supposed to like that sort of thing.'

'You shouldn't go making generalisations.' A smile takes hold of her face. 'It was a nice thought though.'

'Thank you.'

'But all this rushing stuff, it's freaking me out.'

Okay, so maybe I *am* rushing a little: moving her into the apartment, redecorating the bedrooms in Surrey and planning a new studio. But I can't help it. The habits of the last few years are proving difficult to break. And besides, there's more than a hint of panic to all this – which I'm not about to own up to. Maybe, just maybe, with everything in place, when she finally gets the entire truth about me, there'll be far too much to walk away from.

'Learning curve, remember?' I squeeze her waist.

'You and your learning curve.'

I urge her to move again, steadying her as we take the last few steps. At the bottom, we pause and take in the scene: to the left, lines of wooden shelving stocked with tins and jars; in the centre, what looks like a huge brass pagoda, nestled in amongst a jumble of displays and stalls. To the right, a row of glass cabinets, manned by assistants decked in straw hats and green shirts. Instinctively, I check the crowd, scanning for a familiar face. It's only a few days since Boyd appeared, and he's already fired off his first shot – a fact I'm not about to share with Maya. But now Beefy's assigned to returning a puddled Lucy to Camden, it's my job to keep Maya safe.

'Chocolate.' She sways a little, pulls out of my grip and makes a break for it across the hall.

'Maya! Back here, now!' I try to follow, but a pair of Japanese tourists get in the way. When I eventually catch up with Maya, she's rooted in front of a counter, eyes wide, surveying the multi-coloured selection of goodies.

'You're not controlling me,' she slurs.

‘I wouldn’t dare.’ Because I’ve learned my lesson. Every time I strong arm this woman into something she doesn’t want, there’s revolution.

‘Chocolates! I want chocolates.’

‘Seriously?’

She nods. ‘And I’m not going anywhere until I get them.’ And she means it. I can see the determination in her eyes. She staggers a little.

Slipping an arm round her waist, I steady her. ‘I thought you didn’t like shopping.’

‘Clothes shopping. But chocolate shopping, that’s the dogs. Chocolate,’ she grins at a bemused assistant. ‘I love chocolates.’ A hiccup. ‘But not all women love chocolates.’ She waves an arm and looks up at me, eyes half-focused. ‘Because that’s a generalisation. I bet Claudine doesn’t eat chocolate. Or Skinny Lily. She probably just,’ she mimes the action, ‘sucks on the wrappers.’

‘Okay.’ I turn to the assistant. We need to get out of here, and quickly too. ‘Can you put together an assortment?’

‘Certainly, sir.’

‘Truffles!’ she squeals.

‘Okay, an assortment of chocolate truffles. Just fill a box. I don’t care how much it costs.’

While the assistant gets to work, Maya begins to list.

‘Maybe ... maybe we could play dirty sex games with them.’ She bursts into a fit of giggles.

Half-wondering what sort of games she’s got in mind, I prop her back up and let out a sigh.

‘He likes that sort of thing,’ she explains, prodding my chest.

I wince. It was bad enough having the size of my dick announced in front of a stunned assistant upstairs – Lucy’s filter malfunctioning big time – and now Maya’s filter seems to have malfunctioned too. I raise an eyebrow at the assistant, giving him a ‘help me out here’ sort of smile, and while he doubles his efforts, I draw Maya away from the counter. I know how to put a lid on this. Wrapping her in my arms, I whisper into her ear.

‘So, you wouldn’t marry me then?’

‘Uh?’

‘And you wouldn’t want kids?’

‘Kids?’

‘The pitter-patter of tiny feet.’

‘Erm ...’ Her lips curve into an embarrassed smile.

‘I wonder why you brought it up.’

‘Brought what up?’

‘Children?’

‘Erm ...’

‘Oh, Miss Scotton. You’re giving yourself away.’

‘Am I?’

‘Yes.’ I kiss her gently, happy in the knowledge that marriage and children are definitely on her mind. It’s just as well, seeing as that’s exactly where I want this to go. ‘I’m willing to bet you won’t remember this conversation tomorrow.’

‘What conversation?’

Assortment prepared and money exchanged, I set about manoeuvring the pissed-up love of my life back to the car. It’s not easy, what with navigating the swarms of shoppers and searching out the correct exit. At last, thankfully, we reach the BMW.

‘Do you just park anywhere you want?’ she demands, looking up and down the street. ‘I bet you do.’

‘When you spend a mint in there,’ I point back at the door, ‘you get to park here.’

‘You didn’t have to spend a mint in there.’

‘My woman needs clothes.’

‘I am not *your* woman. And I could have gone somewhere cheap.’

‘I don’t do cheap. Not where you’re concerned.’

‘Those granny knickers were cheap.’

‘Needs must.’

I guide her into the passenger seat, place the truffle box on her knee, shut the door and reach the driver’s side just in time for the show. Settling myself in, I can’t help but smile as I watch it all unfold: Maya wrestling with the seat belt, and then the box. Tugging it open, she spills half the contents into the foot well, mutters expletives and sets about gathering together errant truffles.

‘Music?’ I ask.

‘That stuff people do with guitars and drums and things?’ She sits back, kicks off her shoes, puts her feet up on the dashboard and flashes me a grin. ‘Yes, please.’

I know what’s going on here. By her own admission, she’s feeling horny. So now, in the hope I’ll develop a stonker and whisk her off to the spanking bench, she’s doing her best to wind me up.

‘What would you like?’ I ask.

‘What have you got?’

‘Plenty.’

Gazing into her eyes, I laugh quietly. We’ve just replayed a snippet of our first disastrous date and she knows it, because she’s grinning back at me now. Jesus, I love this woman. And I know which song I’m going to play for her. Reaching over, I flip through the dashboard display, opting for Adele’s version. As I rev the engine and pull off, the opening bars of ‘Make You Feel My Love’ kick in.

Listening to the first verse, she bites into her first truffle.

‘Are you saying you love me?’ she asks.

‘Random choice.’

‘You are. You’re saying you love me.’

Of course I am. ‘Eat your chocolate. And don’t puke.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Sir?’

‘Sir.’ She flashes those green eyes. ‘I meant what I said. I want to know what it’s like.’

‘I bet you do.’ And my cock hardens at the very thought of it: playing the cold, hard dominant with Maya. She’s asked for this because of yesterday, because I dropped my guard and let him surface. And while half of me wishes she’d forget it ever happened, the other half is really fucking tempted to give her what she wants. ‘We’ll discuss this when you’re sober.’

‘Pah. Sober.’

While she digs into a second truffle and sings along to the rest of the song, I navigate the streets of Knightsbridge, checking the rear-view mirror more often than necessary, making absolutely sure we’re not being followed. As soon as the song comes to an end, she begins to speak again.

‘What do you see in me?’

‘What do I see?’

‘I mean look at it.’

‘Look at what?’

‘It.’

‘It?’ I glance away from the road to find she’s pointing at herself with both hands.

‘It’s pissed. And it’s just been bad.’

‘It’s been very bad, but I don’t mind.’

‘You don’t? That’s weird.’ With a shrug, she goes back to rummaging through the assortment box. ‘I thought you were angry.’

‘I was ... a little bit. But it couldn’t last. It never does.’ I pull up at a set of lights. ‘You know one of the things I like about you, Maya? And I mean really, really like?’ I turn to her. ‘It’s the fact that you’re just yourself. No airs and graces. No pretence. No giving in to please me. None of that.’

‘Did other women do that?’

I nod.

‘One of the drawbacks of being a sex god.’ She giggles.

‘One of the drawbacks of being rich.’ The lights change, and we pull off again. ‘None of those women ever saw the real me ... and if they did, they wouldn’t have wanted him.’

Probably trying to process my words in her fuddled brain, she’s silent for a while.

‘I love you, Dan,’ she says at last.

Keeping my eyes on the road, I smile.

‘You know when I first realised?’ she asks. ‘When we got back from Surrey, on your motorbike thing. I’ve told you before, and I’m telling you again. I love you.’

‘Thank you.’

‘So say it back.’ She waits. ‘Why won’t you say it?’

‘There’s a time and place for everything.’ Because I’m working up to it. These are the most important words I’ll ever utter, and I want her to remember them. This is one thing I’m not going to rush.

‘You’re messing with my head, Foster. It’s very easy. You just say it. I. Love. You.’

And I will say it. Any day now. ‘You’ve dropped a truffle.’

‘Shit.’

She leans down again, trying to rescue it. And that’s enough to distract her. I laugh at the gloriously dishevelled, ridiculously beautiful wine-monster at my side, the woman who’s injected mayhem into my world and brought me back to life. My next words are lost to her, but it doesn’t matter. They’re my own private promise.

‘Whatever you want, sweet pea ... it’ll soon be yours.’

Twenty-four-hour television news drones on in the background. Politicians argue. Wars play out in front of my eyes. The utter madness of humanity. At least I’ve found my sanctuary from all this misery. And right now, she’s lying on the sofa, flaked out with her head on my lap. Holding the brief for tomorrow’s meeting with the Housing Minister in one hand, I smooth her hair with the other.

‘Want something to eat?’

Eyes closed, she shakes her head. ‘I feel sick.’

‘I’m not surprised. Half a tonne of chocolates, several bottles of champagne ...’

‘And wine. Don’t forget the wine.’ She readjusts herself. One eye opens. ‘What are you reading?’

‘A load of bollocks.’

‘Sounds interesting.’ The eye closes again.

‘I wish.’

I must have read the first paragraph ten times now, but it’s just not going in. The Future of Affordable Housing: dull enough in its own right; impossible to concentrate on with Maya’s drunken demands swirling about in my head. Giving up on the document, I drop it to the floor and set about working through those demands one by one, beginning with the easiest – spanking. She wants more of it, which comes as no surprise seeing as she’s already experienced the pleasure it can bring. Mentally, I file it under the heading ‘Absolutely’ before moving on to pain, something new in the world of Maya Scotton, and something that gives me serious cause for concern. I have no idea why she’s craving it, but I’ve clearly tapped into an issue she needs to confront. Deciding to leave pain on the side lines for now, I come finally to punishment, whips, the desire to be demeaned – all of which are totally out of the question. Because I love this woman, worship the ground she walks on, pissed or sober. There’s absolutely no way I’m ever going to damage her.

‘Shall I put a film on?’ I ask.

‘Can’t focus.’

‘You could listen.’

‘Ears don’t work.’

I laugh quietly, knowing she’ll regret this tomorrow. While she drifts back into sleep, I stretch out a little and gaze up at the painting now hanging above the fireplace. An intricate latticework of branches, a tapestry of texture and light. The woods in Limmingham. A place I visited more than once, never realising I’d become part of local folklore, linked to it forever – the boy who disappeared.

‘What are you thinking about?’ she asks, her eyes open again.

‘I’m thinking of the ghost.’

She turns her head slightly, fixing on the picture.

‘You didn’t need to hang it there,’ she murmurs. ‘It must bring back bad memories.’

‘It can stay. I like it. It’s fitting. It reminds me I *did* become a ghost ... a shell.’ Feeling nothing, letting no one near, addicted to the oblivion of the dominant. ‘Until I met you.’

I smile down at her, surprised at how easy it is to open up.

‘Tell me something,’ she smiles back. ‘One memory from Limmingham.’

She wants to dig further, to know me better. And I want to share everything, even the darkest parts of the story. But not tonight. In spite of Boyd’s machinations, I’m feeling contented, even peaceful, and I don’t want to ruin the evening. With her sanctuary in front of me, I think of mine: the beach in winter, the library.

‘Books,’ I whisper.

‘Uh?’ She turns back to me.

‘Books. I ended up at Cambridge, reading literature. Ever wondered why?’

‘Oh, books.’

‘You remember the school library?’

‘Uh huh.’

‘It had these things in it called books.’

‘I know that.’

‘I used to spend a lot of time in there. Used to smuggle books home.’

‘Why?’

‘Because if he knew, he would have put an end to it. He didn’t want me to enjoy anything. So, I found an old torch in the shed, stole some batteries, and read at night.’

Her eyes widen a little. 'What did you read?'
I smooth her forehead. 'Anything and everything. Anything that took me away.
Narnia. *The Hobbit*. *The Borrowers*.'

'I read *The Borrowers*.' She grins. 'Teeny, tiny people.'
'Quite.'
'You liked teeny, tiny people?'
'What's not to like?'

While she stifles a snigger, I run my fingers through her hair. 'There was this little
section for advanced readers.'

'Oh, I bet you were advanced, Mr I'm-bloody-brilliant-at-everything.'
'Of course I was. Dickens. I loved Charles Dickens. Didn't understand half of it,
but hey ...'

'I never made it to Dickens.' She thinks for a moment. 'I loved *The Wolves of
Willoughby Chase*. Did you ever read that?'

'Yes, I did.'
'It was an old copy. Not many date stamps.'
'One of those was mine.' I trace a finger down her cheek.
'Really?'
'Really.'
'That's amazing. We read the same book, held the same book in our hands.'
'A few years apart.'
'We went to the same places in our heads. That's amazing.'
'It was a small library, Maya. In a very small school.'
She grins. 'Don't care. Still amazing.'
'I know. And do you know what else is amazing?'
'What?'

'That I can talk about it.' Brushing a thumb across her lips, I remind myself that
Maya's done this for me. She's set me free and dragged me back into the light. Day
by day, it's easier to acknowledge the past, and the more I acknowledge, the more I
feel alive. I'll give her anything in return. Anything she wants. Which brings me
back to my current quandary. Could I give her another touch of the cold, hard
dominant ... but without the damage?

She slaps her lips and closes her eyes. 'I'm sorry.'
'What for?'
'Acting like a spoilt bitch ... in Harrods. I'm sorry.'
'Don't be. Go to sleep.'
'Can't get up the stairs.'
'Nod off here. I'll carry you up.'
'Can't do the business tonight.' She giggles. 'Nothing works.'
'Then just sleep.' I smile. 'You're going to need all your energy tomorrow.'
'Why?'
Because I've made my decision. 'You'll see.'

In the soft light of an evening sun, surrounded by sweet peas, we're sitting on the bench in the kitchen garden, sipping tea. I'm in my favourite place in the world, with the woman I love. Over the rim of her teacup, she gives me a smile that pierces me to the depths of my heart. And I know I'll be content to the end of my days.

'Dan?'

A dark mass forms behind her. Growing steadily, it morphs into the outline of a man, casting a shadow over everything. The temperature plummets. Panic sets in. I know exactly who that is. And I need to act fast. But I can't ... because suddenly, I'm paralysed.

'Dan, I'm here.'

Jolted awake, I open my eyes and out of a blur, Clive's face comes into focus.

'You okay?' he asks, deadly serious.

'Yes.' Although I'm not entirely sure. My breathing's a little fast.

'I don't think you are.'

'I'm fine.' I will it back under control. 'Just a bad dream. Where's Maya?'

'In the waiting room.'

'On her own?' I see the shadow again, feel the cold.

'With Beefy.'

I relax a little, but not for long. Increasingly aware of an all-too familiar sensation in my leg, I grit my teeth. Sleep brought respite, but now I'm awake, it's back: a deep, bruising ache at the moment, it's about to sharpen into full-on pain.

'You wanted to see me alone first,' Clive prompts.

I sift through a muddle of memories. Of course, I did. Because as soon as I woke this morning, it all returned. 'We need to talk.' A stabbing sensation cuts into my shin. Steeling myself against an incoming tide of agony, I press on. This has to be done quickly. 'It wasn't an accident. I remember everything now. The brakes didn't work. I'm sure they'd been tampered with.'

I'm expecting shock, disbelief at the very least. But Clive simply says, 'I know.'

I'm stumped. 'How?'

'Boyd.' He frowns. 'He called me last night. Fuck knows how he got my number, but he knew you'd pulled through. He told me straight out he'd had your brakes cut.'

Even though I suspected as much, I can barely believe what I'm hearing. 'He admitted it?'

'Yes.'

'So call the police.'

'We can't.'

'What do you mean?' I glance at the door, anxious now. Maya can't know anything about this. 'He tried to kill me.'

'I know.'

'So?' I try to sit up. A searing pain shoots through the top of my chest.

'Don't move, you prat.' Clive eases me back onto the pillow. 'Calm down.' He glances at the monitors. 'I mean it, Dan. They've got this lot linked up to gizmos outside. They're keeping a close eye on you. If you carry on like this, you'll have Dr Feelgood in here with his magic syringe, and then you'll be out of it.'

I let my head fall back on the pillow, drawing in a few careful breaths until the worst of the pain ebbs away.

'I take it you remember what Boyd threatened?' Clive asks.

‘Of course.’ Trying to ease the discomfort, I shift slightly.

‘Well, it’s not about to go away. And now there’s more.’ He gives me a warning look, letting me know he’s about to say something I won’t like. Clearly, I’ll need to curb my reaction. ‘He wants you to finish with Maya.’

‘What?’

‘He tried to take you out of the picture, and failed ... thank God. But he’s still determined to split you two up, whatever it takes.’

‘You can’t always get what you want.’

In spite of my assertion, Clive’s not giving in. ‘I spoke with Foultons. They think you should play along, end it with her, make her think it’s real.’

And that does it. ‘Foultons can fuck off.’

He lays a hand on my shoulder. ‘Calm down.’

‘I told her I’d never hurt her again. I made a promise.’

‘And I don’t care. You’ve got no choice. You need to do it their way. End it with Maya. Foultons can keep an eye on her. And in the meantime, they’ll find Boyd.’

I shake my head. ‘I can’t hurt her.’

‘Think about it ... if you can.’ Clearly convinced the morphine’s messing with my judgement, he glances at the drip.

‘I’m perfectly compos mentis.’

‘Then you’re fully aware of the situation. No one’s safe.’

‘I’ve got enough money ...’

‘I know you have, but where do you draw the line, Dan? You protect one person and he moves on to the next. The man’s unhinged. We have no idea what he’s capable of. You know I’m talking sense. Maya, Lucy, Norman, Betty, Maya’s parents, her sister, your sisters, Jodie ...’

‘I get the picture.’

‘And it doesn’t stop there, because Boyd has no line.’

Behind the pain, the ache begins to grow, eating into my bones and scrambling my brain. But through it all, I know one thing: Clive *is* talking sense. Boyd doesn’t know where to stop. Until we find him and deal with him, we have to play along.

‘Fine. I’ll do it your way. But I can’t hurt Maya. She needs to know. She needs to be in on this.’

‘No.’

‘For fuck’s sake, Clive.’ I shift again.

‘Calm. Your heart rate’s going back up.’ He watches the display, waiting for it to settle. ‘This needs to be believable.’

‘I can’t ...’

‘Okay,’ he hisses. ‘Go ahead. Tell Maya. But what if she slips up? One wrong word, one phone call, one text ...’

‘She can keep a secret.’

‘And everyone can make a mistake.’ He pauses, his eyes darkening. ‘I’m not prepared to risk it, Dan. You’re not the only one caught up in this shit. The fewer people who know, the better. I’ve done enough for you. Now, do something for me.’

We stare at each other for an age, the silence punctuated only by beeping from the heart monitor. And finally, through a haze induced by drugs and pain, the logical part of my brain kicks into gear. The fewer, the better. Less chance of a cock-up.

Reluctantly, I nod.

‘Thank you,’ he says, subdued now. ‘It’s just temporary. Remember that. And yes, it’s going to hurt Maya. And it’s going to hurt you. But you won’t be the only ones hurting. I’m going to have to keep away from Lucy.’

‘You don’t need to ...’

‘Yes, I do. If we have any links, Boyd’s going to think you’re passing messages.’ He rubs his eyes. ‘We’re running out of time. Let’s get on to practicalities. The police are going to be here soon. They’ll ask about the accident. You tell them you remember nothing. Got that?’

I nod again.

‘They’ll probably know about the brakes. If they ask you about enemies, you don’t have any.’ Without waiting for a reply, he gets to his feet. ‘Now ... I’m going to go and give Maya the news.’

Jesus. This is all moving too fast. What the hell’s she going to think of me? ‘I should do that.’

‘You’re in no fit state.’

‘She’s not going to buy it, Clive. What reason are you going to give?’

‘She told me you had a row. Do you remember?’

Of course I do: my sister’s eyes reviving memories I’d rather bury; absolute rage and desperation striking out of nowhere; a complete inability to think straight. ‘Yes.’

‘Layla?’

‘Yes.’

‘Apparently you went apeshit.’

‘I know.’ And I’m not proud of myself. Maya was only trying to help. ‘But you can’t use that.’

‘Why not? Did you mention it yesterday?’

‘She tried to bring it up. I didn’t let her. I told her I couldn’t remember.’

‘Then it’s a goer.’

‘No.’

‘It’s the only credible thing we’ve got.’ He waits for my acquiescence.

And I give it with a nod ... because, yet again, he’s right.

‘Good call.’ He makes for the door. ‘I’ll tell her you remembered ... and now it’s over, because she went too far.’

Watching him leave the room, I steel myself. I know I’ve changed over the past few weeks, but Maya’s changed too, finding the strength to confront anything. She won’t give up without a fight. If I’m guessing right, and if she can get past Clive and Beefy, she’ll be straight in here demanding to know what the fuck’s going on. Less than five minutes later, my prediction comes true. The door bursts open, allowing one seriously pissed-off woman to barge in.

‘I couldn’t stop her,’ Clive apologises, following in Maya’s wake.

As soon as I set eyes on her, my pulse races and my heart pounds. I close my eyes and turn away, listening to Clive’s voice.

‘Maya, I told you, he’s not up to it. You need to go.’

And now Maya’s: ‘I’m not leaving. If you think I’m just walking away, then you’re very much mistaken.’

A searing heat takes hold of my right leg. The heart monitor begins to beep madly. ‘It’s over,’ I mutter, hating the sound of the words.

‘Is it?’

I’m startled when she leans over me, a hand to either side of my head. Opening my eyes, I look up at her, wanting to tell her I love her ... that I’ll never let go. Instead, I close my eyes again, against the anger. ‘Just go.’

‘No. Don’t you remember what I said in Bermuda? I’m through with running away and hiding. I’m through with denial and avoiding the sodding issues.’

‘Maya ...’

‘So, anything you’ve got to say, you can say it to my face. And while we’re at it, you’re an idiot. Do you know that? You’re the biggest fucking idiot I’ve ever met in my life. Either that or the biggest liar, or both. Because all that stuff you said – about loving me, about me being the one, about this being for keeps – it was all lies.’

I force my eyelids open. This is killing me, in every possible way. And in spite of what I promised Clive, I know I just can’t do it: I can’t hurt her, not again.

‘None of it was lies,’ I whisper.

‘Then why this?’ Suddenly perplexed, she straightens up. ‘All I did was contact your sister. And now you want to break up with me? After everything you said, you’re going to throw it all away because ...’

‘No,’ I cut her off. In an instant, the pain doubles.

‘Dan,’ Clive intervenes. ‘This isn’t what we agreed.’

‘I don’t give a fuck what we agreed.’ Another shot of agony. ‘I can’t do it. Sit down, Maya.’

She hesitates.

And I’m not sure how much longer I can go on. ‘I said ... sit down.’

Thankfully, she draws up a chair and does as she’s told.

‘Dan,’ Clive says. ‘You’re in pain. I should get a doctor.’

‘Fuck the pain. And don’t let them near me until I’m done.’ Agony envelops me now, radiating up from my leg. The fucking morphine’s not enough. ‘We haven’t got long,’ I rasp. ‘The police are on their way, so just keep quiet and listen.’

‘To more lies?’

‘Do me a fucking favour.’ I wince, shift myself a little, and resolve to get this over with. I just need to lay out the facts. ‘I knew what you’d done. As soon as I woke up, I remembered.’

‘You did?’

‘Yes. But I pretended to forget. It was a lot easier that way.’

‘Then why this?’

I can’t go on. Exhaustion overtakes me. I look to Clive. He’s standing at the foot of the bed. ‘You tell her.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course I’m fucking sure.’ And I’m finished. My eyelids lower of their own accord, and through waves of pain, I listen, desperate to hold on to every word as Clive explains how this was no accident, how I’d remembered what happened with the brakes, Boyd’s call, our decision not to involve the police.

‘You’re not going to tell them?’ Maya demands.

I muster up enough energy to shake my head.

‘You remember the threats?’ Clive asks her.

‘Of course.’

‘Well, they still stand.’

He reminds her of what Boyd’s already done, the sort of people working for him. He repeats Foultons’ advice. ‘Nobody’s going to be safe. We can’t protect everyone ...’

‘So why this? Why finish with me? I don’t understand.’

It’s my turn to speak. I look up at her, conscious of tears stinging to life. ‘He wants to split us up, Maya. You know that. Everything he’s tried so far hasn’t worked. So now he’s moved on to something else.’

‘Which is?’

‘He told me to finish with you ... and make it convincing. Layla was the only thing I could think of.’

‘And you just went along with it?’

‘What choice did I have? It was only going to be temporary. Until we find him.’

‘You had the choice to let me know what was going on.’

Pain flares again. I haven’t got the energy for this ...

‘Which is what he wanted to do.’ Clive saves me. ‘But Foultons advised against it. If you two try to deceive Boyd, at some point, somebody’s going to slip up. And look at the state of him, Maya. Can you really keep your distance?’

‘She can do it,’ I mutter. ‘I told you, she can.’

My words seem to bolster her, changing her attitude entirely. In a split second, all signs of anger disappear. Processing the facts, she gathers her resolve. And that puts an end to all self-control. I’m in awe of this woman, and this is tearing me apart. The first tear escapes down my cheek.

‘Dan, no.’ She acts quickly, smoothing my forehead. ‘Don’t you dare cry. I hate it when you cry.’

‘Touché.’

‘I’m sorry ... I’m so sorry ... I’ve been so awful.’ And now she’s crying too.

In spite of the pain and exhaustion, I try to give her as much comfort as I can. ‘No. You just proved how much you love me. The last thing I wanted was to hurt you. I wanted to tell you. I wanted to ...’

Absolutely determined, she cuts me off in mid-flow. ‘You just did what you thought was right. It’s okay. Don’t worry.’ She looks to Clive, then back at me. ‘So, we have to make him think he’s won.’

I smile up at her in admiration. That’s my woman. Completely on board, and strong enough to see this through. I know she’ll prove Clive wrong. She won’t slip up.

But now we’re running out of time, and I need to go over the details.

‘It could be weeks. Months. I’ll have all your things moved back to Camden. You’ll be shadowed. Nothing obvious. You’ll still be protected, so don’t worry about Boyd. I’ll be watching you, every day. But you can’t contact me.’

‘We could phone, text, write to each other.’

‘No. No chances. We don’t know what he’s capable of. He’s already got our phone numbers. He might be tapping our calls. And you can’t tell anyone. Apart from the security firm, it’s you, me and Clive. We’re the only people to know.’

‘Not Lucy?’

I shake my head.

‘But how can Clive go on seeing her?’

‘I can’t,’ Clive says. ‘Our two worlds need to remain separate.’

‘But you need to tell her.’

‘The fewer people who know, the better.’

‘So you’re going to end it with her?’

Clive doesn’t answer. He looks at the door.

‘And this doesn’t bother you?’

‘Of course it bothers me,’ he snaps. ‘But she can’t know and you can’t tell her. And don’t let her go on the rebound, for fuck’s sake.’ He points at Maya. ‘I don’t want her seeing anyone else.’

I can’t help smiling at my friend, because it’s clear: just like me, he’s been thoroughly fucked over by Cupid. And about time too.

I’m vaguely aware of the door opening, a nurse’s voice: ‘The police are here. They want to see you now.’

‘I’ll stall them for a couple of minutes.’ Ushering the nurse back into the corridor, Clive moves to the doorway. ‘And then we need to get Maya out of here.’ With that, he’s gone.

And this is it. Goodbye ... for now. As I watch her get up, my heart threatens to shatter. In a few short weeks, this woman has become my entire world, the foundations to everything. I have no idea how I’m going to cope without her.

Battling back the tears, she leans over and kisses me. ‘I love you.’

‘I know.’ Wanting to hold her here forever, I raise a hand to her head. ‘Be strong. Keep painting. Make sure Lucy stays on the straight and narrow. And put on a good show.’ I pause, unable to believe what I’m about to say, but it’s all necessary for the charade. ‘You’ll need to see other men.’

‘What?’

‘A few dates. Make it look like you’re moving on.’ Inside this is destroying me, but I can’t let it show. Instead, I smile. ‘But no kissing ... and definitely no shenanigans. I fucking own you, woman.’

‘And I fucking own you right back.’ She hesitates. ‘So what will you do?’

‘I’ve got enough on my plate for now.’ That fucking leg for a start. ‘But when I get out of here, whatever you see, whatever you hear about me, don’t believe it. And never forget – not for one second – that I love you.’

‘How can I ever forget?’

For a while, the outside world fades into insignificance. It’s just me and Maya, lost in each other, neither of us wanting this to end. Eventually, she glances at the door, clearly uneasy.

‘We’ll sort this out, sweet pea,’ I tell her. ‘We’ll find Boyd and we’ll deal with him. And then you and me ... we’ll have a life together.’

She nods, kisses me again, and begins to unfasten the necklace.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I can’t wear it. If Boyd finds out ...’

I do my best to reach up and close my fingers around her hand, and the pendant. There’s no way she’s giving that back. It belongs with her.

‘Keep it safe. Look at it and think of me ... because one day soon, you’ll be wearing it again.’

It’s a doctor who enters next. While he inspects the monitor read-outs, Maya takes her leave with a final kiss. In a flurry of movement, she’s quickly replaced by Clive and two police officers. I can barely concentrate now, and the next few minutes are a blur. After a mercifully brief interview – with Clive taking the lead, and me backing him up – he escorts the police from the room and returns.

‘They’ve gone.’ He takes a seat next to me.

‘Thank fuck.’

‘And I’ve got to go. The doctor says you need to rest.’

Thank fuck for that too. I’m worn out. But before he goes, I need to apologise, because I’ve let him down. ‘I couldn’t do it, Clive. I’m sorry.’

‘What’s done is done. We’ll just have to deal with the consequences.’ He gazes at me for a moment, smiles a little, then nods. Thank God. He understands. ‘Beefy’s taken Maya back to Camden. I’ll go over later and finish with Lucy.’

‘I’m sorry. For all of this. I owe you big time.’

‘We look out for each other. That’s the way it is. How many scrapes have you got me out of?’

‘Plenty.’

‘Exactly. Now, listen to me. No worrying. I’m onto everything. I’ll get the board together, fill them in on plans for the sale and put the feelers out.’

‘I need to be involved.’

‘Trust me, you don’t.’

‘It’s my company.’

‘And I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but you’re in hospital.’ He waves at the drip and the monitors, his sense of humour returning. ‘You’re lying in a bed with tubes up your nose and a drip in your arm, and a bag full of something nasty coming out of you.’ Pulling a disgusted face, he leans over and inspects the bag at the other end of the catheter tube. And then he sits up straight, serious again. ‘Just focus on getting better, for Maya’s sake. She’ll be perfectly safe. We’re renting a flat over the road from her place. Two men in there, night and day. Every time she leaves, she’ll be tailed. And I’ve got a couple of things for her: mace and an alarm.’

‘I want daily reports.’

‘I’m sure you do.’

‘And photos.’

‘That’s stalking, Dan.’

‘I don’t care. And I need someone to speak to Layla.’ Because I can’t face her, not yet. ‘Maya’s the best person. Ask her to go up to Limmingham. Layla needs to keep away. If she’s hears about this, she’ll be straight down here, and I can’t ...’

‘I know.’

‘I need my mobile.’

‘You’re not having it.’

‘I just ...’

‘No way.’ Suddenly brusque, he stands up. ‘Right. I’ll get Maya’s stuff packed up and shipped back to Camden.’

Reality rammed home. That’s not going to be easy for her. I need to soften the blow.

‘Can you do me a favour?’

‘Another one?’

‘I need you to dig out John Lennon.’

‘Isn’t that illegal?’

‘A CD.’ I frown. This is no time for jokes. The pain’s returning with a vengeance. ‘There’s a CD in my collection. *Double Fantasy*. Give it to her. Tell her to listen to ‘Woman’.’

‘“Woman”?’

‘Just do it, Clive.’

Evidently going back through the lyric in his mind, he purses his lips and gazes into space. ‘Oh, I get it. She sees the child inside the man, and all that.’ And now he laughs. ‘You’re an incurable romantic. Did you know that, Foster? Soft as fucking putty.’

‘If I weren’t laid up in bed, I’d deck you right now.’

‘Maybe I should make the most of this situation.’

A doctor enters, silencing us both.

‘Enough for one day.’ He checks the monitors. ‘Mr Foster needs to rest. You’re still in pain, Dan.’

Which is an understatement, to say the least. But I'm not about to own up to the truth. 'I'm fine.'

'No, you're not.' He sorts through a tray near my bed. 'I'll increase the pain relief and give you something to help you sleep.'

'No ...'

'You need that second operation on your leg. And *we* need you strong enough for it.'

'You're not knocking me out again.'

'Actually ...' He slots the syringe into the cannula and presses down. 'I think you'll find I am.'

I sense a cool rush in my veins, and begin to drift.

Shut Your Eyes

1

‘You need a drink.’

‘I’m good, thanks.’ Standing by the window, half-hidden by a curtain, I survey the street below. ‘No alcohol.’ I need a clear head for this. The next few hours are going to be the most important hours of my life. ‘There’s a car.’

‘Yeah, we get those in Manhattan.’

‘It’s drawing up.’ I turn from the window. ‘Is it Maya?’

Sprawled on a sofa, Gordon checks his mobile. ‘No messages yet.’

‘So where the fuck are they?’

‘I guess the traffic’s pretty bad. Sit down, for Christ’s sake.’

‘I can’t.’

Gordon’s mobile buzzes. He checks it again. ‘Oh hey, turns out it *is* them.’

‘Shit.’ I return to the window, edging a little further back behind the curtain, and watch the passengers alight from the kerbside door. Even from here, I can tell who’s who. First Lucy, then Maya. My heart begins to thud. I pull back.

Gordon sighs. ‘Would you please sit down?’

‘But they’re here.’

‘You’re like a fucking meerkat on speed.’

‘They’re coming in.’

‘So?’ He points at the opposite sofa. ‘Sit.’

Reluctantly, I do as I’m told. Leaving the window behind, I sink onto a sofa.

‘You’d better pull this together, man,’ Gordon grins. ‘You’re gonna look a real doofus.’

I lean back and try to relax. ‘You ought to go down now.’

‘Not yet. You gotta give women time to do whatever they do in hotel rooms.’

Which I’m fully aware of. The truth is I just want Gordon out of my hair. He may be one of the best friends I could wish for, but at the minute he’s the single most irritating wing-man in the world.

‘How long?’

‘An hour.’

‘Shit.’

‘Just enough time to catch up on my soap.’ He gets to his feet.

‘What?’

‘*Days of Our Lives*, man.’

In despair, I watch as Gordon sets about locating the television, finding it concealed in a huge wooden cabinet. He grabs the remote from the cabinet, switches on the television and searches through the catch-up options. Finding what he wants, he settles in for an hour of drama, while I get up, pace the room, sit down, and get up again, repeating the process over and over. Every now and then, Gordon lets out a sigh, or adjusts the volume, or tells me to quit fidgeting. I’m thoroughly relieved when his programmes come to an end.

‘That should do it.’ He switches off the television, stows the remote and closes the cabinet. ‘Show time, Dan.’ He turns to me. ‘So, tell me again. How are you going to play this?’

He’s not asking for ideas. We’ve spent most of the day going over the game plan. He’s checking it’s all sunk in.

‘Tell the truth,’ I mutter. ‘Take the flak.’

‘Cool, calm and ...’

‘Fucking collected.’

‘Correct.’ Gordon laughs. ‘So, this is what you say.’ He assumes a terrible English accent. ‘Now, look here, Maya, old chap ...’

‘We don’t call women ‘old chap’.’

Ignoring me, he carries on. ‘I know you believe me to be a total numpty, but I say, old bean, I’d like to fill you in on the facts, what, what, what.’

‘Nobody says ‘what, what, what’.’

‘And by the way, my dear, I love you so much it’s rather bloody painful.’ And now he reverts to his own accent. ‘Come on, bro. It’s simple.’

‘Believe me, where Maya’s concerned, nothing’s simple.’

With a frown, he sits on the sofa opposite me. ‘I get it. She’s spirited. She’ll give you a rough ride. But behind it all, she’s still in love with you. That’s why she bad-mouthed you back in London.’

‘She bad-mouthed me because she hates me.’

‘Yeah, and that’s why she headed off for a damn good thrashing.’ He tuts, numerous times, and shakes his head. ‘Daniel, old boy, she did all of that because she was hurting. And she was hurting because she loves you, noddle head. Sure, it’s not going to be a breeze, but she’ll come round. I promise.’

‘I hope you’re right.’ I chew at my lip. I can’t be bothered to argue with Gordon any more. I’ll change the subject a little. ‘Did we choose the right ring?’

‘It’s too late to change your mind.’ He pauses. ‘Yeah, we chose right. Simple and elegant. Silver. Classy. You should have checked the size though.’

‘How was I supposed to do that?’

‘I don’t know. There must be ways. I guess you can always get it changed after.’

‘After ...’ I stare into space, wishing I could just transplant myself a few hours down the line, explanations given, everything sorted, pleasuring the hell out of Maya in bed.

‘Chill out, man. You’ve got yourself a real gem there.’

‘Talking of which ...’ I take the necklace out of my pocket.

‘What’s that?’

‘A Tiffany necklace. It belonged to my mum.’ I hold it in my palm, examining the tiny sweet pea. ‘My adoptive mum. I gave it to Maya. She sent it back to me. I want her to wear it again.’ I look up to find Gordon smiling sympathetically.

‘You mark my words, Dan. You’ll have your wish in no time.’

‘You think?’

‘Do bears crap in the fields?’

‘Do bears shit in the woods,’ I correct him.

‘Yeah, whatever.’

I can’t help but laugh, in spite of the shit-storm of nerves bubbling up inside. ‘You’re a good friend, Mr Finn.’ A handful of desperate phone calls and a couple of meetings confirmed that. After seventeen years of minimal contact, it’s as if a day hasn’t passed since our time at Cambridge. ‘Tell me something. Why didn’t we meet up more often?’

‘After you went AWOL?’ He raises an eyebrow. ‘Because you were too busy building shopping malls, and I was too busy being the son my parents never wanted.’ He checks his watch. ‘It’s time to go.’ He stands up. ‘I’ll call them from the lobby and wait down there. We’ll go straight to the gallery. It’s a fifteen-minute ride. An hour to mingle. A half hour for the interview. Another fifteen for the ride home.’

And then, say, another ten before she comes up here. Give it two and half hours before she arrives.'

'If she does.'

'Oh, she will.' With a wink, he makes for the lift, leaving me to stew in isolation.

Two and a half hours. It feels like a lifetime ...

Taking up my position at the window, I watch them leave. And then I pace the apartment, half-wishing time would fly, half-wanting it to stop. I check the iPod station, take a seat on a sofa for few minutes, and then I'm back on my feet again. After visiting the lift several times, I head for the master bedroom and sit at the end of the bed, worrying over a handful of questions. Will Gordon really be able to lure her up here? Will she stay long enough to hear me out and forgive me? And if she does, what the fuck's she going to think of the scars? Knowing I'm not the man I used to be – in more ways than one – I get up and check myself in the mirror. Black suit. No tie. Just formal enough to acknowledge the importance of the evening.

'You've got a job to do here,' I remind myself, out loud. 'The most important job of your life. And if you're going to get it done, you need to keep calm.'

Returning to the lounge, I sit on a sofa, running through the checklist in my mind. Song at the ready. Necklace in pocket. A bottle of her favourite wine, chilled and waiting to be opened. Arguments rehearsed. A ring tucked away at the back of a drawer. And roses ordered ... because I'm going to take them back.

Time drags on. I'm up and down like a yo-yo. More pacing, more checking, more thinking. By the time Gordon returns, I'm back on the sofa, and almost at my wits' end.

'Hey, lover boy.'

I give a start and look up. He's standing in the doorway.

'How did it go?'

'Great.' He saunters in. 'She agreed.'

'She's coming?'

'Yup. She thinks I'm hitting on her.' He grins. 'And you're the last person she's expecting.'

'Thank fuck for that.'

'She did a pretty cool interview, by the way. I'll get you a copy.'

I nod. 'And the triptych?'

'It went down real well. You've got a star on your hands there.'

'Hopefully on my hands.'

'You'll be fine.' The grin widens. 'Now, she won't be long. I'd better skedaddle.'

'Where are you going?'

'Hiding out in Queens.'

'Queens?'

'No.' He seems affronted. 'It was a joke, man. Jeez, you British. No sense of humour. I'm hunkering down over on the West Side.'

A case of the jitters kicks in as I follow him to the fire doors. 'Can you lock these things?'

'Lock them?'

'I don't want her running. Not before I've said my piece.'

'Safety first.'

'Come on.'

'Not happening. We can override the elevator, but I'm not locking these.' His eyes flicker with mischief. 'Just lay on a bit of that famous Foster charm.'

He leaves again. And I stare at the lift doors, only jolting out of my stupor when I hear the mechanism kick into life.

Fuck.

She's on her way.

With my brain descending into a mire of panic, I contemplate just staying here, greeting her as the doors open. But, no. That would be too risky. A quick punch of a button, and she'd be gone. Instead, I revert to the original plan. Leaving the heavy doors open, I return to the lounge, select play on the iPod, check the volume's not too loud, and take cover in the bedroom.

As the first bars of 'Shut Your Eyes' kick into life, I dodge back behind the door, giving it a couple of minutes before I dare a peek. She's in the lounge now, facing away from me, evidently mesmerised by the view of Central Park. And at the sight of those wonderful curves, that glorious backside, the soft blonde hair cascading down her back, I'm a complete mess – pulse racing, heartbeat accelerating, lungs on hold. Breathe, I tell myself. Just fucking breathe. You can't go out there like this. Willing my body back under control, I watch as she drops her handbag and walks over to the window. And now it's time to move. Calling on a lifetime of practice, I pull on the 'cool-as-fuck' disguise and emerge from my hiding place. Sidling forwards, hands in pockets, I come to a halt behind the love of my life, waiting for her to make eye contact with my reflection.

And when she finally does ... she's flummoxed.

I don't know where it comes from. It just seems fitting. 'You took your time.'

Her shoulders tense. 'Dan? What the fuck?'

I vowed not to do this, but I'm desperate for physical contact. My drug of choice is standing right in front of me, and I need a fix. Taking my hands out of my pockets, I move in close behind her, slide an arm around her waist and drink in her scent. I'm half-expecting to be told to fuck off. When she says nothing, I lean in closer and smooth my lips across her neck. Smooth, silky skin. It feels like home.

'Stop.'

Immediately, I pull away, because I need to show her things have changed. No more bulldozing.

'Let go of me.'

I do as I'm told, and back off.

'Who the fuck do you think you are?' She turns to face me.

And I'm incapable of speech, because now I'm completely under her spell, hypnotised by the sheer beauty of that face, the fire in her eyes, the promise of those lips. I spot a second's worth of attraction – a lifeline – before she's thoroughly devoured by anger.

'You treat me like dirt and come back for a second helping?'

Shit. Where to start? What did I rehearse with Gordon? It's all gone. I'll just have to wing it. 'There's more to this than meets the eye.'

'Of course there is. I suppose you've locked me in.'

I'm not about to confess the truth, that I would have done if Gordon hadn't scuppered my plans. 'Naturally.'

'Why break the habit of a lifetime?'

'It's not the habit of a lifetime. I've only taken to false imprisonment where you're concerned.'

I move towards her, because I just can't keep away. Moth. Candle. Instinct.

She holds up a finger. 'Do *not* lay a hand on me.'

Fuck it. Patience, remember? 'I won't. I promise. Not until you want me to.'

‘Until?’ She gasps. ‘Like it’s ever going to happen. I don’t know what you’re up to, but I’m out of here.’

She makes a break for it and in a panic, I quickly position myself in front of the exit. The sudden movement sends a shot of pain searing through my leg. The worst time for this to happen. With a grimace, I will myself to ride the discomfort, just get on with it.

‘Look.’ I raise a hand. ‘I know you think I’m a huge fucked-up disaster zone. You made that perfectly clear. But you need to hear me out. All I’m asking is five minutes of your time.’

‘Demanding, not asking. There’s no asking when you’re the one with the keys ... unless you’re lying again.’

Shit, no. Don’t let her work it out. ‘Just five minutes. And then ... possibly ... the rest of your life.’ I retrieve the necklace from my pocket, and offer it up. ‘This thing doesn’t know whether it’s coming or going.’

‘Keep it.’

‘It’s yours.’

‘I don’t want it.’

‘It belongs to the woman I love.’

She laughs, dismissively. ‘You don’t love me. You’re plain lazy, Dan. It doesn’t work out with Little Miss No Tits so you’re down to recycling your ex.’

Seriously? She believes that? ‘You were never my ex.’

‘Yeah, whatever.’

She waves a hand. I take a step forward and try a smile.

‘I said don’t touch me.’

I come to a halt. ‘Somebody’s pissed off.’

‘I wonder why. Where’s Gordon?’

A clear deflection. By now, she must know Gordon was in on the plan. She’s just playing for time.

‘You’ve got me to yourself, and you’re worried about Gordon? He’s gone home.’

‘But he’s staying here.’

‘You don’t really think he needs to rent out a room in this place? He’s got an apartment on the West Side.’

‘But I thought ...’

‘He was coming on to you?’ It’s my turn to laugh. ‘No chance of that. Gordon’s one hundred percent gay.’

And pretty much as I expected, she’s floored. ‘You’re kidding me.’

‘I’m not. He’s more likely to try it on with me than you.’ And now I’m feeling distinctly mischievous. ‘You weren’t attracted to him, were you?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Because I wouldn’t be too happy about that.’

‘I didn’t fancy him.’

Bingo. She’s defending herself, and that can only mean one thing: there’s still hope. I decide to push a little more. ‘But you came up here to see him.’

‘He said he wanted to talk. And anyway, why am I the one getting an interrogation? You’ve got a few things to explain yourself, mister.’

Thank God. We’re moving on to explanations, and that’s definitely progress. ‘Such as?’

‘Such as? Well, why this, for a start? Why lure me up here without letting me know what was going on?’

‘We didn’t want to take any chances.’

‘Bloody rich. You’ve been keeping me in the dark ... again. You didn’t trust me.’
I move forward.

And she moves back. ‘Stop right there. You didn’t trust me, did you?’

‘We couldn’t let you know what was going on. Foultons advised ...’

‘I don’t care what Foultons advised. You promised.’

Yes, I promised. And I hate the fact I had to break a vow. ‘I know, but we had to keep it simple. Lucy might have found out.’

‘I could have dealt with that.’

‘You’ve had enough to deal with.’

‘Yes,’ she shouts. ‘I’ve had plenty to deal with. Weeks of shit, thank you very much. You didn’t get in touch with me, you pulled out of Slaters, you didn’t sell Fosters, not one word of reassurance, and then ... you went and got yourself another woman.’

Instinctively, I take another step forward.

‘Stop!’

‘Never.’ Shit. I’m bulldozing again.

‘Leave me alone.’

‘Impossible.’ But what the hell? It’s worked before.

‘I wait three sodding months for you and the first time you see me, you talk to me like I’m ... shit on your shoe.’

‘Interesting phrase.’

‘What?’

‘Every time I’ve ever had shit on my shoe, I’ve never bothered talking to it.’

‘You’re not funny.’

‘If you say so.’

No more pissing about. I need to kiss her, and I need to do it now. While I’ve got her distracted, I edge forwards. Noting that she’s retreated as far as she can – a sofa’s blocking her way – I grab her by the arm, tug her in, and get on with job in hand, delivering a long, hard kiss designed to knock her off her feet. And thank God, it works. No resistance. No struggling. Instead, she simply melts, allowing me full access to her mouth ... and she kisses me right back.

Result. I knew it. She’s still mine.

‘It was all an act,’ I breathe.

‘Well, it was a fucking good act. You were all over that tart like a rash.’

I bite back an urge to laugh. ‘Enough of the clichés, Maya. It was an elaborate ruse.’

‘Elaborate ruse, my arse. You were enjoying it.’

‘Trust me. I wasn’t.’

‘Did you kiss her?’

‘No.’

‘Did you fuck her?’

There’s only one woman I want to fuck, and she’s in my arms. ‘Certainly not.’ I press her in against my crotch. ‘This thing belongs to you.’ And I’ve got the hard-on to end all hard-ons. ‘Are we through with the ranting yet?’

‘Condescending twat.’

Why do I love it when she insults me? I have no idea. All I know is I’d love to insult her back, keep up the banter, but she gives me no chance.

‘Just because you kissed my face off, it doesn’t mean we’re good. I’ve got plenty more ranting to do yet. Now get off me.’

It's the last thing I want to do. Because she's just kissed me stupid, and she's certainly not running, but needs must. Deciding to wind her up with a little play acting, I let her go and walk away. 'Okay. But would you like a drink while you're at it?'

I place the necklace on the counter, knowing full well that Gordon was right: she'll be wearing it again ... and soon.

Dawn. Early August. While the city slowly wakes from its dreams, I look out over Great Portland Street, watching a bus pass by below, a taxi, a single, lonely commuter heading off to work.

'Dawn's much more impressive at home, little man,' I whisper. 'I'll share it with you some time.' Swaddled in a blanket, the tiny bundle of warmth in my arms stirs quietly. I smile down at my son, consumed entirely by an absolute, unshakable bond of love. He stirs again, opens his eyes, and even though he won't understand a word of it, I feel the need to make a vow. 'You're going to get the best start in life, Jack, the best childhood anyone could ever wish for.' I brush a finger across his nose. He goes back to sleep. 'I'm going to protect you and take care of you, support you and encourage you. But most of all, I'm going to love you every single day, for the rest of my life. I'll never let you down.'

'Dan?'

I turn.

Sitting up now, bleary eyed, messy-haired and utterly stunning in spite of everything she's gone through, Maya's awake again. 'What are you doing?'

'Showing him the world.' Cradling the baby and grinning like a prize idiot, I return to her bedside.

'Big softy.'

'Got me in one.'

She yawns and holds out her arms. Carefully, I hand over the baby. After making sure my wife's propped up with enough pillows to keep her comfortable, I take a seat. And while she rearranges the blanket and admires our son, I glance at the small wooden box on the bedside cabinet. Made of cedar. Bought in Bermuda. She hasn't noticed it yet, but the contents are ready and waiting to do their job.

'I showed him his first dawn,' I tell her.

'Did he like it?'

'Not sure. He was asleep.'

With a laugh, she smooths his cheek. 'He really does look like you.'

'I should bloody well hope so.'

'The girls are going to be all over him when he's older.'

'He'll be fine, as long as he eventually finds 'the one' ... like daddy did.' I lean over. 'Hear that, Jack? If the woman of your dreams hoves into view, just grab hold of her and never let go.'

Maya raises an eyebrow. 'It doesn't quite work like that, Jack.' She rocks him gently. 'For a start, you need to be sure she likes you back.'

'Like mummy did,' I counter, recalling that first meeting in my office: Maya's flushed cheeks and parted lips, the way she couldn't keep her eyes off me ...

'And then you need to win her over.'

'Like daddy did.' Eventually ... after making a few ridiculous mistakes along the way.

'And take your time.'

She's got me on that one. 'Yes, mummy's quite right. Take your time, Jack. And definitely no bulldozing.' I wave a finger at him in mock admonishment.

We laugh. And then we slip into a comfortable silence, both of us admiring our son. A car horn sounds outside. He wriggles again. A tiny foot appears from the bottom of the blanket.

'What time is it?' Maya asks.

‘Just after five. You slept for a couple of hours.’

‘When can we go home?’ She blinks at the window. Pale light pours in across the floor.

‘Whenever you like.’

‘Let’s make it soon. You need a rest. You must be knackered. I know I am.’

‘I’m not surprised after thirteen hours of labour ...’

‘Thirteen?’

‘You were amazing, by the way.’

‘Was I?’

‘Oh yes, in your own inimitable style.’

Her head flops back against the pillows. ‘It was bloody awful. Thank God for gas and air.’

I reach out, nudging the blanket back over Jack’s foot. ‘Do you remember telling the midwife she had nice boobs?’

She gasps in surprise. ‘No. I didn’t?’

‘Yes, you did.’

‘Oh God.’

‘*And* you told me to fuck off ... several times.’ I won’t mention the fact she also called me a dick head, a bastard, and a fuckwit, all of which was just the tip of the iceberg. I lost count of the times I apologised to the midwife. Thank heavens she took it all in her stride.

‘You shouldn’t use bad language around the baby.’

‘He’s asleep ... and five-hours-old. I don’t think he’s picking up vocabulary just yet.’

‘Point taken.’ She smiles. ‘And I’m sorry I told you to eff off. I was in pain.’

‘I thought as much.’

‘I’ve had a taste of what you went through with your leg.’

‘I’m pretty sure that wasn’t on the same level as child-birth.’

‘Is it okay?’

‘The leg? Fine.’ The occasional twinge or ache, but nothing on the scale before the operation. And right now, it’s absolutely fine, which is amazing seeing as I was on my feet for most of the night.

‘Can’t have my husband suffering.’

‘Your husband doesn’t suffer. Quite the opposite. In fact, at this particular moment in time, he’s the happiest man in the world.’

She grins. ‘So happy he might get committed?’

‘Possibly,’ I whisper conspiratorially. ‘But don’t tell anyone. I don’t want to risk it.’

While London gears up for its daily bustle, we smile at each other. Cloaked in peace, absorbed in each other’s company, we’re cast away without a care in the world. And more than ever, I’m in awe of this woman who appeared out of nowhere. She’s become everything to me: my lover, my partner, my saviour, my confidante, my best friend.

‘Isn’t he beautiful?’ She looks back down at our son.

‘Yes, he is.’ I follow suit, taking in the little boy curled up in his mother’s arms, pristine and innocent, untainted by the outside world. I’m just wondering how it’s possible to love a baby so much, when the inevitable questions creep into my mind. Did my mother feel the same when she first held me? And if so, where did it all go?

‘I bloody love you, Dan,’ Maya whispers. ‘And I bloody love him.’

That's all it takes to shake off the past. Hearing those words from Maya's lips, I'm dragged back to the present – to the scene in front of me – and now I'm thinking of the future ... because that's all that matters now.

'I bloody love you too,' I whisper back. 'And I bloody love him.' I reach over and tickle his cheek. 'You've got it made, Jack. We're going to make sure you have a brilliant life.'

Another baby trance ensues. Maya studies his face. I lift the blanket again and take his foot between my thumb and forefinger, gently massaging it, wondering at the tiny perfection of his toes.

'I want more,' she whispers.

Letting go of the foot, I sit up straight, astonished at her words. A little over six hours ago, she swore she'd never get pregnant again. 'Woah, lady! Calm down.'

'But I do.'

'What's the rush?'

Her eyes twinkle. 'Chill your beans, Dan.' She adjusts the blanket again. 'I don't mean straight away. Maybe next year.'

My mouth falls open.

'And I want four. Remember?'

'Of course.' She told me that on our wedding day. 'But you also told me to slow down. Are we swapping roles here?'

'Looks like it.' She grins. 'Come on, Dan. It's inevitable. We might as well just get on with it.'

I narrow my eyes. 'Are you on something?'

'I think I'm just high on life.'

'That makes two of us.'

Totally high on life. But it's time to inject a little realism into the situation. Even though I never want to tear myself away from my wife and son, I have no choice.

'I need to go back to work on Wednesday.'

She lets out a sigh. 'I know.'

'We're in the middle of sell-off negotiations.' And although she understands, I still feel the need to explain. 'I can't duck out. I'm sorry.'

'It's okay.'

'If you stay down in Surrey, you'll have Betty and Norman to help. And there'll be plenty of visitors.'

'You made the calls?'

'Of course. Message relayed to all concerned. Baby Jack arrived at four minutes past midnight. Seven pounds, six ounces. Mother and son doing well.' I trace a finger down her arm. 'Listen. Going back to work is the last thing I want to do, but it's all for the best in the long run. When Fosters is gone, I'll have all the time in the world for my wife and family ... no matter how big it gets.'

She hesitates, uncertain now. 'Is it what *you* want?' she asks. 'Do *you* want more children? I mean, I sort of sprang this on you ...'

'Well, let's see.' Leaning over, I retrieve the box from the bedside table. I guessed this might come up and made my preparations, just in case.

'What's that?'

'Something from a while back.' I tap the lid. 'In between contractions, while you were off your trolley on gas and air, you actually apologised for getting pregnant ... several times.'

'I did?'

‘Uh huh. In fact, you went on quite a bit about it. Said you were an idiot for missing your pill. Asked me if I was really ready to be a dad. You were pretty sure I wasn’t.’

‘Oh.’

‘And I reassured you I was.’

‘It was probably the pain talking ...’

‘But you’re still worrying about the children thing. So, just in case you needed proof, I had these delivered while you were sleeping.’ I pause. ‘Remember I told you I wrote you letters with broken wrists?’

‘Yes?’

‘I wasn’t joking. They’re all in here. Fourteen of them, to be precise.’ From the dark days when I was stranded at the house, incapacitated, frustrated, unable to do anything but watch and wait. Opening the box, I take out the first letter and lay it on the bed. ‘Mostly just rambling on about how dull life is when you’re stuck in plaster.’ I pick out the second and hold it up. ‘But this one’s filthy.’

‘Is it?’

I nod. ‘It describes in minute detail what I wanted to do to you. I was sex starved at the time.’

‘You dirty dog. Can I have a look?’

‘Not now.’ Arching an eyebrow, I replace the second letter in the box. ‘Read it when you can deal with the consequences.’ And now I retrieve the first from the bed. ‘This is the one I’d like you to look at now. It’s the first one I ever wrote.’ I hand it over. ‘Ignore the handwriting. Looks like a six-year-old’s.’

Still cradling Jack, she unfolds the paper.

‘Is it a love letter?’ She grins.

‘No. It’s a final demand for rent.’

She laughs, then reads silently, growing ever more serious. Finally, she returns to the beginning and reads out loud.

‘Maya, I love you. Be sure of that. I’ve loved you from the moment I laid eyes on you. And I’ll always love you. Never doubt it, not even in your darkest hours. You’re in my head, every single second of the day. I’m watching, protecting, doing everything I can to help. And when all this is over, I’ll do exactly the same. It’s my mission to make you happy, and to keep you happy. I’m yours. Completely. Until the day I die.’

A tear glistens in her eyes. ‘Oh, Dan ...’

‘Keep reading,’ I order.

She draws in a deep breath. *‘Elizabeth Barrett Browning said it like this: ‘How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my foal can reach.’* Your foal? I didn’t know you had a baby horse.’

‘Soul. I told you. Bad handwriting.’

She smiles and continues. *‘But I simply can’t count the ways I love you, because they’re ...’*

She struggles to make out the next word.

‘Infinite,’ I help.

‘Infinite?’ She gazes at me. ‘Really?’

‘Really. Keep going.’

‘Trust me. You’ll get everything you want. But here’s what I want. Oh, a list of demands.’

‘Read.’

'I want you in my life every single day. I want to wake to your beauty first thing in the morning. I want to go to sleep with you in my arms every single night. Because when you're with me, I'm complete.' A tear trickles down her cheek. *'All I can do right now is think of you, endlessly, and dream of the day we're reunited. And when we are reunited, I want it all ... with you. I want us to marry. And by the way, I heard you say yes.'* She grins. *'And should you ever decide to chance it with your pelvic floor, I want to have a family with you.'* She takes in another breath and looks up. 'You did want children?'

'Of course.'

'Even before I got pregnant?'

'Even before. It might have happened a little more quickly than I expected, but I'm glad it happened. Just look at him. Now read on.'

'And believe me, Maya, I'll do my very best to be the father I always wanted.' She falters, her voice cracking with emotion. 'Oh, Dan ... What did I ever do to deserve you?'

'What did I ever do to deserve you? That's the question.'

More tears make an appearance. I grab a tissue from the bedside table and exchange it for the letter.

'Want me to finish?'

She nods.

'Right.' Skimming over the terrible handwriting, I locate where Maya left off. *'When you came into my life, I was lost. When you found me, I found myself. You brought light to my darkness, and hope to my despair.'* I pause. *'You made me live again.'* I look up, unable to go on now, because I'm crying too.

The baby stirs. We look down in unison, watching his tiny lips curl upwards.

'Is that what I think it is?' I ask in wonder.

'A smile?' She laughs quietly. 'No, I think it's just wind. They don't smile for a few weeks yet.'

'Daddy's an idiot. He's got a long way to go before he's perfect.'

'No.' She lays a hand on my arm. 'Daddy's not an idiot at all ... and he's just perfect the way he is.'