

By the author of **Say You're Sorry**

# Michael ROBOTHAM



# WATCHING YOU

'He grabs the reader's  
attention and keeps a tight grip  
on it till the final sentence'  
*CANBERRA TIMES*

**FREE** first chapter sample from Get Reading! [www.getreading.com.au](http://www.getreading.com.au)

Courtesy of Hachette

*I fell in love and I followed her, that's all you need to know. She had hair the colour of bottled honey and wore different ribbons to school every day, even though most girls her age had grown out of wearing ribbons. Winter had made her beautifully pale but the cold had rouged her cheeks. She pushed her hair back behind her ears and shifted her satchel between shoulders, right to left.*

*She didn't see me. She didn't even know I existed. I didn't duck into doorways or press myself against walls. I didn't slow when she slowed, or speed up as she turned the corners. I was like a shadow, following in her footsteps, looking at the world through her eyes. She wore a navy blazer and a tartan skirt that swayed against her thighs and little white ankle socks that peeked out of her polished black shoes.*

*We caught the train at East Didsbury and got off at Burnage station. Then we took a bus along Fog Lane as far as Wilmslow Road. At Claremont Grove she bought hot chips at the Butty Full Café, sucking vinegar and salt from her fingers, her nails bitten to the quick.*

*It was Marnie Logan who triggered the fitful birth of my imagination. It was Marnie Logan who gave my life meaning when my days were darkest and I could see no hope at all.*

*I still have the souvenirs – the strands of her hair, a ribbon, a used lip-gloss, an earring and a leather bangle from Morocco – all of which I keep in a polished wooden box. Piled together these objects look like random flotsam left behind by houseguests or bric-a-brac discovered down the side of the sofa. Yet each of them tells a story and is testament to the close shaves, the small triumphs, the fleeting moments of pure exhilaration. I cannot explain the feelings I have when I look at them, the pride, the shame, the tenderness and the joy.*

*I am the most important figure in Marnie's life, but she doesn't know it yet. I am the half-figure at the edge of her photographs and the shadow in the corner of her eye that vanishes each time she turns*

*her head. I am the ghost that dances behind her closed lids and the darkness that blinks when she blinks. I am her nameless champion, her unheralded hero and the conductor of her symphony. I am the one who watches.*

# 1

When Marnie Logan was fourteen she dreamed of marrying Johnny Depp or Jason Priestley and living happily ever after in a house with a Gone-with-the-Wind staircase and a double-fridge full of Mars Bars. When she was twenty-five she wanted a house with a small mortgage and a big garden. Now she'd take a flat on the ground floor with decent plumbing and no mice.

Pausing on the landing, she swaps two plastic bags of groceries between her hands, flexing her fingers before continuing the climb. Elijah is ahead of her, counting each step.

'I can count to a hundred,' he tells her, putting on his serious face.

'What about a hundred and one?'

'Nope.'

'Why not?'

'That's too many.'

Elijah knows how many steps there are from the lobby to the top floor of the mansion block (seventy-nine) and how long it takes for the electronic timer to flick off, plunging the stairwell into darkness (sixty-four) unless you run really fast;

and how to unlock the front door using two different keys, the gold one at the top and the big silver one at the bottom.

He pushes open the door and runs down the hallway to the kitchen, calling Zoe's name. She doesn't answer because she's not at home. She'll be at the library or at a friend's house, hopefully doing her homework, more likely not.

Marnie notices an envelope on the doormat. No stamp or address. It's from her landlords, Mr and Mrs Brummer, who live downstairs on the second floor and who own four other flats in Maida Vale. This makes them rich, but Mrs Brummer still collects coupons and holds up the queue at the supermarket by counting out coppers that she keeps in little reusable plastic bags.

Marnie puts the letter in a drawer with the other final demands and warnings. Then she unpacks the groceries, the cold items first, restocking the fridge. Elijah taps his finger on the fishbowl where a lone goldfish, stirred from indolence, circumnavigates his universe and comes to rest. Then he runs to the front room.

'Where's the TV, Mummy?'

'It's broken. I'm getting it fixed.'

'I'm going to miss *Thomas*.'

'We'll read a book instead.'

Marnie wonders when she learned to lie so easily. There is a gap in the corner of the room where the TV used to be. Cash Converters gave her ninety pounds, which paid for the groceries and the electricity bill, but not much more. After unpacking the bags, she mops the floor where the freezer has leaked. A mechanical beep tells her to close the door.

'The fridge is open,' yells Elijah, who is playing in her wardrobe.

'I got it,' she replies.

After wiping the speckled grey bench tops, she sits down and takes off her sandals, rubbing her feet. What's she going to do about the rent? She can't afford the flat, but she can't afford

anywhere else. She is two months behind. Ever since Daniel disappeared she's been living off their limited savings and borrowing money from friends, but after thirteen months the money and favours have been exhausted. Mr Brummer doesn't wink at her any more or call her 'sweetie'. Instead he drops around every Friday, walking through the flat, demanding that she pay what's owed or vacate the premises.

Marnie goes through her purse, counting the notes and coins. She has thirty-eight pounds and change – not enough to pay the gas bill. Zoe needs extra phone credit and new school shoes. She also has an excursion to the British Museum next week.

There are more bills – Marnie keeps a list – but none of them compare to the thirty thousand pounds she owes a man called Patrick Hennessy, an Ulsterman with malice in every lilt and cadence of his accent. It was Daniel's debt. The money he lost before he went missing. The money he gambled away. According to Hennessy, this debt didn't disappear when Daniel vanished. And no amount of crying poor or begging or threatening to tell the police will wipe it out. Instead the debt is handed down like a genetic trait through a person's DNA. Blue eyes, dimples, fat thighs, thirty-thousand pounds: from father to son, from husband to wife . . . In Marnie's worst dreams, the Ulsterman is a distant light, hurtling towards her down a long narrow tunnel, miles away, but getting closer. She can feel the rumbling beneath her feet and the air pressure changing, unable to move, locked in place.

Hennessy visited her two weeks ago, demanding to see Daniel, accusing Marnie of hiding him. Forcing his foot in Marnie's door, he explained the economics of his business, while his eyes studied the curves of her body.

'It's a basic human trait, the desire to live in the past,' he told her, 'to spend a few harmless hours pretending that everything will be as it used to be, but the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny aren't real, Marnella, and it's time for big girls to grow up and take responsibility.'

Hennessy produced a contract signed by Daniel. It named Marnie as being equally liable for his debts. She pleaded ignorance. She tried to argue. But the Ulsterman only saw things in black and white – the black being the signature and the white being a sheet covering Marnie’s body if she failed to pay.

‘From now on you work for me,’ he announced, pinning her neck against the wall with his outspread fingers. She could see a stray piece of food caught between his teeth. ‘I have an agency in Bayswater. You’ll go on their books. Half of what you earn will come to me.’

‘What do you mean, an agency?’ croaked Marnie.

Hennessy seemed to find her naivety amusing. ‘Keep that up. It’ll play well with the punters.’

Marnie understood. She shook her head. Hennessy raised his other hand and used his thumb to press against her neck below her earlobe right behind her jawbone, finding the nerve.

‘It’s called the mandibular angle,’ he explained as the blinding pain detonated down Marnie’s right side, making her vision blur and her bowels slacken. ‘It’s a pressure point discovered by a martial arts professor. The police use it to control people. Doesn’t even leave a bruise.’

Marnie couldn’t focus on his words. The hurt robbed her of any other sense. Finally, he released her. ‘I’ll send someone to pick you up tomorrow. Get some photos taken. How does that sound?’ He forced her head up and down. ‘And don’t even think of going to the police. I know the name of the nursing home where you keep your father and where your children go to school.’

Pushing the memory aside, Marnie fills the kettle and opens the fridge, removing a Tupperware container of gluten-free Bolognese, which is pretty much all Elijah eats these days. He’s happy. He doesn’t cry. He smiles all the time. He just won’t put on any weight. ‘Failure to thrive,’ is what the doctors call it; or more technically he has Celiac Disease. If he doesn’t eat he can’t grow and if he doesn’t grow . . .

‘I have to go out tonight,’ she tells him. ‘Zoe will look after you.’

‘Where is she?’

‘She’ll be home soon.’

Her daughter is fifteen. Independent. Strong-willed. Beautiful. Rebellious. Hurt. Adolescence and hormones are difficult enough without tragedy. All children destroy their own childhoods by wanting to grow up too quickly.

Tonight Marnie will make five hundred pounds. Hennessy will take half the money. The rest will pay the bills and be gone by tomorrow afternoon. Her cash doesn’t circulate so much as spiral down the drain.

Standing at the sink, she looks down at the garden below, which has a paddling pond and a broken set of swings. A gust of wind rocks the branches, sending leaves into a spin. She doesn’t know most of her neighbours in the mansion block. That’s what happens when you live on top of people and beside them and opposite them, but never *with* them, not together. She might never meet the person on the other side of the plastered wall, but she will hear their vacuum cleaners knocking against the skirting boards and their petty arguments and favourite TV shows and bedheads bashing against common wall. Why does sex sound like someone doing DIY?

On the far side of the garden, beyond the laneway and the lock-up garages, there is another garden and an identical mansion block. Mr Badger lives on the fifth floor. Elijah gave him the name because his grey streak of hair reminded him of Badger in *Wind in the Willows*. Marnie came up with another name after seeing Mr Badger standing naked at his kitchen window with his eyes half-closed and his hand moving frantically up and down.

A few days ago somebody passed away in the mansion block next door. Marnie had been looking out the window when she saw the ambulance pull up and collect the body. According to Mrs Brummer, who knows everybody in Maida Vale, it was

an old woman who'd been sick for a long time. Shouldn't I have known her, wondered Marnie? Did she die alone like one of those lonely old people whose bodies are found months afterwards when a neighbour finally complains about the smell?

When Elijah was born Daniel put a baby monitor near his cot but discovered almost immediately how many other parents in the neighbourhood had bought the identical monitor broadcasting on the same channel. They heard lullabies and music boxes and mothers breastfeeding and fathers falling asleep in their baby's room. Marnie felt as though she was spying on complete strangers, yet oddly in touch and connected with these people who were unknowingly sharing their experiences.

Elijah has stopped eating. Marnie tries to coax another mouthful, but his lips tighten into a single line. She lifts him down from his booster seat and he follows her into the bedroom, where he watches her getting ready. He holds her lingerie up to the light with his hand under the fabric.

'You can see right through it,' he says.

'You're supposed to be able to.'

'Why?'

'You just are.'

'Can I zip up your dress?'

'This dress doesn't have a zip.'

'You look very pretty, Mummy.'

'Why thank you.'

She looks in the mirror and turns sideways, sucking in her stomach, holding her breath, causing her breasts to stick out.

*Not bad. Nothing has started to sag or wrinkle. I've put on a little weight, but that's OK, too.*

On other days she will look at the same reflection and hate the harshness of the lighting or find faults where she could be kinder.

Along the hallway she hears the front door open and close. Zoe dumps her schoolbag in the corner of her bedroom and kicks off her shoes. She goes to the kitchen where she opens

the fridge and drinks milk straight from the container. Wiping her mouth, she pads barefoot to the living room. Shouting.

‘Where is the *fucking* TV?’

‘Mind your language,’ says Marnie.

‘It’s broken,’ says Elijah.

Zoe is still shouting. ‘It’s not broken, is it?’

‘We can do without a TV for a few weeks.’

‘Weeks?’

‘When the insurance money comes in we’ll get a new one, I promise. A big flat-screen TV with cable and all the movie channels.’

‘It’s always about the insurance money. We’re not going to get the insurance.’

Marnie emerges from the bedroom, holding her shoes. Her daughter is still staring at the empty corner where the TV once sat. Her blonde curls are flying loose, curling towards the light.

‘You can’t be serious,’ says Zoe.

‘I’m sorry,’ says Marnie, trying to give her daughter a hug.

Zoe shrugs her away. ‘No you’re not. You’re useless!’

‘Don’t talk to me like that.’

‘We don’t have a computer. We don’t have the internet. And now we don’t have a fucking TV!’

‘Please don’t swear.’

‘Weeks?’

‘I said I was sorry.’

Zoe spins away in disgust and slams her bedroom door. Elijah has gone quiet. He coughs and his whole body shakes. His chest has been jumping all day. Marnie feels his forehead. ‘Is your throat sore?’

‘No.’

‘Tell Zoe to take your temperature.’

‘Can I stay up?’

‘Not tonight.’

‘How long will you be?’

‘Not long.’

‘Will I be awake when you get home?’

‘I hope not.’

The doorbell rings. Marnie presses the intercom button. A small screen lights up. Quinn is standing on the front steps.

‘I’m on my way,’ she tells him, grabbing her purse and keys. She knocks on Zoe’s door and presses her face near the painted wood.

‘I’m going now. Dinner is on the stove.’

She waits. The door opens. Zoe is wearing shorts and a singlet-top. One ear-bud is wedged in her ear, the other dangles. They hug. It lasts a beat longer than usual. An apology.

Elijah pushes past Marnie and launches himself into his sister’s arms. Picking him up easily, Zoe settles him on her hip and blows a raspberry into his neck. She carries him to the living room and looks out the large bay window overlooking the street.

‘You must be the only waitress in London who gets picked up in a fancy car.’

‘It’s a bar, not a restaurant,’ says Marnie.

‘With a chauffeur?’

‘He works on the door.’

‘A bouncer?’

‘I guess you could call him that.’

Marnie checks the contents of her bag. Mobile phone. Lipstick. Eyeliner. Mace. Keys. Emergency numbers. Condoms.

‘Take Elijah’s temperature and give him Calpol if he has a fever. And make sure he does a wee before you put him to bed.’

Walking down the stairs, she hoists her dress higher on her hips to make it easier. As she reaches the foyer, she tugs it down again. A door opens. Trevor peers from inside his flat and opens the door wider.

‘Hi, Marnie.’

‘Hi, Trevor.’

‘Going out?’

‘Yep.’

‘Work?’

‘Uh huh.’

In his early thirties, Trevor has a skinny chest and widening waist, freckles across his nose and cheeks. Headphones are hooked over his neck and the cord dangles between his knees.

Marnie glances at the exterior door. Quinn doesn’t like to be kept waiting.

‘I’ve bought some new music,’ Trevor says. ‘Would you like to hear it?’

‘I don’t have time right now.’

‘Maybe later.’

Marnie is at the door. ‘Maybe.’

‘Have a good night,’ he shouts.

‘You, too.’

She feels guilty. Trevor is always asking her to listen to his music or watch a DVD. She sometimes borrows his computer to send emails or look up information, but doesn’t linger. Trevor is the caretaker who looks after the gardens and general maintenance. He’s also what Daniel used to call ‘a drainer’: someone who sucks the energy from a room. Other people are ‘heaters’ because they give warmth and make you feel energised and happy around them.

Quinn crushes a cigarette beneath a polished black brogue. He doesn’t open the door for Marnie. Instead he slips behind the steering wheel and guns the engine. Sullen. Silent. Marnie’s stomach rumbles empty. The booker at the agency told her not to eat before working because it would make her feel bloated.

Reaching Harrow Road, Quinn weaves aggressively through the traffic.

‘I told you seven o’clock sharp.’

‘Elijah has a cold.’

‘Not my problem.’

Marnie knows three things about Quinn. He has a Geordie

accent, he keeps a tyre-iron in the door pocket next to his seat and he works for Patrick Hennessy. This is only Marnie's third night. Each time she has felt her stomach churning and her palms grow damp.

'Is he a regular?'

'A newbie.'

'Has he been vetted?'

'Of course.'

Marnie's best friend Penny had told her to ask questions like this. Penny had experience. After university, she worked as an escort in between modelling assignments because the latter couldn't cover her credit card bills or fund her taste in designer clothes. Marnie was shocked at the time. She asked Penny what the difference was between being an escort and a prostitute.

'About four hundred pounds an hour,' Penny replied, making it sound so obvious.

Marnie pulls down the sun visor and checks her make-up in the mirror. Is this my life now, she wonders? Opening my legs for money. Making small talk with rich businessmen, pretending to be dazzled by their charm and wit. Paying back Patrick Hennessy one trick at a time. It's not what she expected or imagined, not when she was Zoe's age, or when she married Daniel, or when she lost him so suddenly. When she was seventeen she was going to be a journalist, writing feature stories for *Tatler* or *Vogue*. She settled for a job in advertising and was a junior copywriter. Loved it. Fell pregnant. Left.

Not in her worst nightmares did she imagine working for an escort agency. And no matter how often she told herself that it wasn't for ever, just a few more weeks, just until she gets the insurance money, it didn't stop the butterflies doing power dives in her stomach.

Only two people knew – Penny and Professor O'Loughlin, the psychologist that Marnie has been seeing. The rest of her friends and family think she has a new job, working as a

part-time manager at an upmarket restaurant. And when these same friends drag out clichéd analogies of ‘whoring themselves’ in their corporate jobs, Marnie just nods and commiserates and thinks, ‘you wankers’.

The car pulls up on The Aldwych opposite Bush House. A hotel doorman crosses the footpath and opens Marnie’s door. She holds up two fingers, wanting him to wait. The doorman retreats, glancing at her legs, his eyes drawn upwards from her ankles to the edge of her dress.

Quinn makes a call.

‘Hello, sir, just confirming that Marnella will be with you shortly . . . sorry for the delay . . . Room 304 . . . Cash up front . . . Five hundred for the hour . . . Yes, sir, have a nice evening.’

Marnie checks herself again, running her fingers through her hair, thinking she should have washed it.

‘How old did he sound?’

‘Over eighteen.’

‘Where will you be?’

‘Close.’

Marnie nods and crosses the pavement, keeping her head down, holding her breath. The doorman ushers her inside, wishing her a good evening. Escorts aren’t welcome in high-class hotels, but are tolerated as long as they dress elegantly and don’t solicit in the foyer or the bar. There are protocols. Don’t linger. If the lifts aren’t obvious, keep walking and give the impression that you know where you’re going. Quinn told her these things, along with the other rules: get the money first; keep your phone close; no bondage unless the client is getting tied up; extra time, extra money.

On the third floor, she studies the numbers. Pausing outside the door, she tries to relax, telling herself she can do this. She knocks lightly with just a knuckle. The door opens immediately.

She smiles demurely. ‘Hello, I’m Marnella.’

The client is in his late forties with a narrow face and a strangely

old-fashioned hairstyle, parted on the right. Barefoot, he's wearing casual clothes.

'Owen,' he says uncertainly, opening the door wider.

Marnie takes off her coat, playing a role now. Quinn had told her to be confident and take charge. Don't let the client know she's nervous or new to the game. Owen is trying not to stare. He takes her coat, his hands trembling. He fumbles with a hanger and forgets to close the wardrobe door.

'Would you like a drink?'

'Sparkling water.'

Crouching on his haunches, he opens the mini-bar. She can see the pale skin above his heels, streaked with veins.

'I can never find the glasses.'

'On the top shelf,' says Marnie.

'Ah, yes.' He raises them aloft. 'You must know your way around a place like this.'

'Pardon?'

'Hotel rooms.'

'Oh, yes, I'm an expert.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean . . .'

'I know you didn't.' She gives him her painted-on smile and sips her drink. 'Listen, Owen, before we start I have to collect the money. That's one of the rules.'

'Of course.'

He reaches for his wallet, which is worn smooth and curved by the shape of his backside.

Marnie feels physically sick. She hates this part. The sex she can make believe is simply sex, but the money turns it into something tawdry and ancient. It shouldn't be a commercial transaction when bodily fluids and hotel rooms are involved. Owen counts out the cash. Marnie crosses the room and slips the bundle of banknotes into her coat pocket. She notices a plastic dry-cleaning bag hanging in the wardrobe.

Smoothing down the front of her dress, Marnie turns back to Owen, waiting for him to make a start. He gulps his drink

and suggests some music, turning on the CD player. It's an old song. When he looks back, Marnie is undressing.

'You don't have to do that.'

'We only have an hour,' she says.

'I know, but we could talk a bit.'

She nods and sits down on the edge of the mattress, feeling self-conscious in her lingerie. Owen sits next to her, a foot distant. He's a thin man with large hands.

'I haven't done this before,' he says. 'I'm not saying that I haven't done *this* . . . It's not like I'm gay or anything . . . I'm straight. I've been with plenty of women. I'm a father, which is why this is difficult for me . . . seeing you.'

'Of course,' says Marnie.

'My mother just died,' he blurts.

'I'm sorry to hear that. Had she been sick?'

'For a long while . . . cancer.'

Marnie doesn't want to hear his life story or to compare notes.

Owen stares at the backs of his hands as though counting the freckles. 'I've wanted to do this for a long while, but my mother wouldn't have understood. And she always seemed to know when I was lying to her. It's not easy caring for someone.'

'I understand,' says Marnie.

'Do you?'

Marnie pats the bed beside her, motioning him to come closer.

'Would you dance with me?' he blurts.

'I'm not a very good dancer.'

'I can show you.'

Owen stands and holds out his arms. Marnie puts her left hand on his shoulder and feels his hand close around her waist. Next thing they're dancing, hipbone to hipbone, her long pink fingernails disappearing in his fist. Spinning. Floating. It's not a big room, but they don't crash into furniture.

Marnie feels small in his arms, like a grown-up niece dancing with her uncle.

‘I haven’t danced since my wedding day,’ she laughs. ‘But my father was never this good a dancer.’

Owen tips her backwards with a flourish, smiling at her smile.

Marnie straightens and they share a moment, unsure of how to proceed. Marnie lets the straps of her negligee slip from her shoulders, pooling at her ankles. About now she normally gets complimented on her breasts, but Owen hasn’t reacted. Wrinkles seem to enclose his eyes. He turns away. Something has altered between them. His nerve has failed him.

‘Please get dressed.’

Embarrassed, Marnie covers herself and goes to the mini-bar. She pours herself a drink, a Scotch this time, drinking it neat.

‘You don’t have to stay,’ Owen says.

‘You’ve paid.’

‘I know, but you don’t have to stay.’

‘Why don’t you go to the bathroom and splash water on your face? You’ll feel better.’

When the door closes, Marnie pulls back the bedding. She takes a condom from her purse and puts it on the bedside table. It’s her third night and she’s learning that every client is different. Her first was a businessman from the Midlands in London for a trade fair at the Earl’s Court Exhibition Centre. Her second was a posh-sounding thirty-something from the City with a wife and two kids at home in Hertfordshire. Now she has a middle-aged man with a mother fixation, riddled with guilt. Worse still, his guilt has become infectious and increased her own sense of shame.

She notices a plastic shopping bag tucked beneath the bed. Nudging it open with her toe, she sees a pair of polished black leather shoes and two envelopes. The first is marked: *Last Will and Testament*. The second: *To whom it may concern*.

Both envelopes are unsealed. Marnie opens the flap and can make out a line below the fold.

*I'm sorry to take the coward's way out, but I have lost someone I love very much and can't think of any other way out of my suffering. Please look after my children . . .*

Marnie's eyes flash around the room. The dry-cleaned suit. The shoes.

Owen is standing in the bathroom door.

'What are you doing?'

Marnie is holding the letter. 'Is this a suicide note?'

'You shouldn't open other people's mail. How much did you read?'

'Enough,' Marnie says, refolding the letter. 'Are you going to kill yourself?'

'That's none of your business.'

'This is wrong. Things are never as bad as you think.'

He laughs wryly. 'Now I'm getting emotional advice from a prostitute.'

Marnie's body stiffens.

'You can leave now,' he says.

'I'm not leaving until you promise me you won't do it.'

'You've known me less than an hour,' says Owen. 'How could you possibly understand?'

Marnie argues the point, finding the words, telling him that life is a gift and a privilege and it shouldn't be wasted. Things can change.

'And tomorrow is another day,' he says sarcastically.

'What about your children? What sort of message are you sending to them? I've felt like you do,' she says. 'I've thought about suicide.'

'This isn't a contest about who has the shittiest life.'

'I didn't give up. I survived.'

She tells him about Daniel disappearing and raising two children on her own. He's standing at the window with his back to her, looking at the lights of Waterloo Bridge.

'How?' she asks.

'The river.'

‘So you were going fuck me and then jump off a bridge?’

‘No, I was going to wait till after my mother’s funeral.’

Marnie’s mouth opens in shock.

‘I can’t swim,’ he explains.

‘That’s not a very nice way to die.’

‘It isn’t supposed to be nice.’

Marnie’s mobile is ringing. It’s Quinn. If she doesn’t answer, he’ll be knocking on the door.

‘*You OK?*’ he asks.

‘Yeah. It’s taking a little longer.’

‘*Is he paying extra?*’

‘It’s not that simple.’

‘*You’re on the clock. Make him pay.*’

He hangs up. Marnie looks at Owen across the bed. There is a long pause and in that awkward moment she feels like she’s pulling him back or maybe he’s pulling her closer. She thinks of Daniel and it makes her angry.

‘You will not do this. You will not disappear. You will not kill yourself. You will stay and you will fight and you will live . . . Promise me,’ she says.

‘Why does it matter to you?’

‘Because I’ve lost my husband and I have a little boy at home and I don’t want him to think the world is such a terrible place.’

‘You care that much?’

‘Yes.’

He smiles at her. It’s almost a laugh. ‘I’ve only paid for an hour.’

‘That’s not the point. I’m not leaving. I’m going to stay here until you promise.’

‘You would stay with me?’

‘Not for sex, only until you promise.’

Owen gazes at her with a mixture of admiration and yearning. Marnie puts on her dress and shoes, balling up her lingerie and shoving it into the pocket of her overcoat. She feels the wad of cash.

'I'll give you back your money.'

'What?'

'Take the money. Do something nice for yourself.'

He doesn't take it straight away. Marnie peels back his fingers and presses the bundle of banknotes into his palm.

'Keep the money,' he says.

'No.'

'You need it.'

Marnie shakes her head. 'This way I'll know you won't do it because you'll owe me. Do we have a deal?'

He nods.

Owen is sitting on the bed, legs splayed, elbows on his knees. Marnie has nothing in common with this man, not money, or class, or education, or age, or interests. She doesn't even know his surname, but somehow she has touched a chord within him or made a connection. It's a strange feeling, watching a man do something because of her.

'When is the funeral?'

'Tomorrow morning.'

'What time?'

'Nine o'clock.'

'I want you to phone me afterwards. I'll give you my number.'

Marnie writes her number on a hotel pad. Owen takes it without looking at her face. 'Would you come with me?'

'To the funeral?'

'It would mean a lot.'

'I have an appointment.'

He nods.

'Listen to me, Owen. You're going to get through this. I'll help you. Call me tomorrow.'

He looks at Marnie's note. 'I thought escorts were supposed to use fake names.'

'I'm not a very good escort.'

Owen laughs to himself.

'What's so funny?'

‘You read stories, don’t you.’

‘Stories?’

‘About hookers with a heart of gold.’

‘It’s not gold,’ she says.

‘You’re right,’ he replies. ‘It’s more precious than that.’

As Marnie reaches the revolving door, she’s already beginning to panic about what Quinn will say. The black Audi is parked illegally in a narrow alley behind the hotel, nearer to Covent Garden. Quinn is leaning on the bonnet, smoking a cigarette. The streetlight behind his head creates a silhouette and throws a shadow on the cobblestones like a dark path leading to his polished shoes.

Marnie keeps the car between them, holding her coat closed as though wishing it could protect her.

‘Did he pay extra?’ Quinn asks.

‘There was a problem. He was going to commit suicide.’

‘And you fell for that?’

‘It’s true.’

Quinn moves towards her, his reflection sliding across the bonnet of the Audi. She tries not to back down, but her throat is thickening and she wants to hide somewhere. He flicks the cigarette aside and pushes Marnie hard against the car.

‘Where’s the fucking money?’

‘I didn’t take it.’

‘So you fucked him for free?’

‘We didn’t do it.’

He laughs again, more sarcastically this time, forcing his knee between her legs. One hand is holding her throat while the other feels between her legs, looking for proof. The roughness of his fingers makes her wince. Humiliated. Angry.

‘Satisfied?’

Her tone ignites him. One punch, delivered low down in the swell of her stomach, doubles her over. She wants to fall, but he’s holding her there, pushing her up against the vehicle.

A second punch lands. Her lungs have no more air to give. He won't hit her face. Bruises are a liability when you're selling a woman's body. He pulls his fist back and swings it into her stomach again. Her limbs jerk. The world flushes up and down in her eyes.

There is a brutal poetry to his movements, each blow delivered with a minimum of effort for the maximum of damage. Quinn takes a thick handful of her hair and puts his mouth to her ear.

'Are you frightened?' he whispers, seeming to savour the moment. He looks along the street. A black cab has rounded the corner, the headlights rising and falling over a speed bump. The cab pulls up. The driver's window slides down.

'Is everything all right?' he asks.

'Fine and dandy,' says Quinn, supporting Marnie with his arm around her waist. 'She had a little too much champagne.'

The driver looks at Marnie. 'Are you OK, miss?'

She nods.

The cab moves away. Quinn opens the door of the Audi and pushes Marnie onto the back seat. She drops her bag, scattering the contents into the footwell. She gathers them up.

'The boss isn't going to be happy,' says Quinn. 'You understand that, don't you?'