

SOON TO BE A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE



Me
BEFORE
You
Jojo
Moyes

NEW
YORK
TIMES
BESTSELLER

a novel by the author of

After You

Prologue

2007

When he emerges from the bathroom she is awake, propped up against the pillows and flicking through the travel brochures that were beside his bed. She is wearing one of his T-shirts, and her long hair is tousled in a way that prompts reflexive thoughts of the previous night. He stands there, enjoying the brief flashback, rubbing the water from his hair with a towel.

She looks up from a brochure and pouts. She is probably slightly too old to pout, but they've been going out a short enough time for it still to be cute.

"Do we really *have* to do something that involves trekking up mountains, or hanging over ravines? It's our first proper holiday together, and there is literally not one single trip in these that doesn't involve either throwing yourself off something or"—she pretends to shudder—"wearing *fleece*."

She throws the brochures down on the bed, stretches her caramel-colored arms above her head. Her voice is husky, testament to their missed hours of sleep. "How about a luxury spa in Bali? We could lie around on the sand . . . spend hours being pampered . . . long, relaxing nights . . ."

"I can't do those sorts of holidays. I need to be doing something."

"Like throwing yourself out of airplanes."

"Don't knock it till you've tried it."

She pulls a face. "If it's all the same to you, I think I'll stick with knocking it."

His shirt is faintly damp against his skin. He runs a comb through his hair and switches on his mobile phone, wincing at the list of messages that immediately pushes its way through onto the little screen.

"Right," he says. "Got to go. Help yourself to breakfast." He leans over the bed to kiss her. She smells warm and perfumed and deeply sexy. He inhales the scent from the back of her hair, and briefly loses his train of thought as she wraps her arms around his neck, pulling him down toward the bed.

"Are we still going away this weekend?"

He extricates himself reluctantly. "Depends what happens on this deal. It's all a bit up in the air at the moment. There's still a possibility I might have to be in New York. Nice dinner somewhere Thursday, either way? Your choice of restaurant." His motorbike leathers are on the back of the door, and he reaches for them.

She narrows her eyes. "Dinner. With or without Mr. BlackBerry?"

"What?"

"Mr. BlackBerry makes me feel like Miss Gooseberry." The pout again. "I feel like there's always a third person vying for your attention."

"I'll turn it on to silent."

"Will Traynor!" she scolds. "You must have some time when you can switch it off."

"I turned it off last night, didn't I?"

"Only under extreme duress."

He grins. "Is that what we're calling it now?" He pulls on his leathers. And Lissa's hold on his imagination is finally broken. He throws his motorbike jacket over his arm, and blows her a kiss as he leaves.

There are twenty-two messages on his BlackBerry, the first of which came in from New York at 3:42 A.M. Some legal problem. He takes the lift down to the underground car park, trying to update himself with the night's events.

"Morning, Mr. Traynor."

The security guard steps out of his cubicle. It's weatherproof, even though down here there is no weather to be protected from. Will sometimes wonders what he does down here in the small hours, staring at the closed-circuit television and the glossy bumpers of £60,000 cars that never get dirty.

He shoulders his way into his leather jacket. "What's it like out there, Mick?"

"Terrible. Raining cats and dogs."

Will stops. "Really? Not weather for the bike?"

Mick shakes his head. "No, sir. Not unless you've got an inflatable attachment. Or a death wish."

Will stares at his bike, then peels himself out of his leathers. No matter what Lissa thinks, he is not a man who believes in taking unnecessary risks. He unlocks the top box of his bike and places the leathers inside, locking it and throwing the keys at Mick, who catches them neatly with one hand. "Stick those through my door, will you?"

"No problem. You want me to call a taxi for you?"

"No. No point both of us getting wet."

Mick presses the button to open the automatic barrier and Will steps out, lifting a hand in thanks. The early morning is dark and thunderous around him, the Central London traffic already dense and slow despite the fact that it is barely half past seven. He pulls his collar up around his neck and strides down the street toward the junction, from where he is most likely to hail a taxi. The roads are slick with water, the gray light shining on the mirrored pavement.

He curses inwardly as he spies the other suited people standing on the edge of the curb. Since when did the whole of London begin getting up so early? Everyone has had the same idea.

He is wondering where best to position himself when his phone rings. It is Rupert.

"I'm on my way in. Just trying to get a cab." He catches sight of a taxi with an orange light approaching on the other side of the road, and begins to stride toward it, hoping nobody else has seen. A bus roars past, followed by a lorry whose brakes squeal, deafening him to Rupert's words. "Can't hear you, Rupe," he yells against the noise of the traffic. "You'll have to say that again." Briefly marooned on the island, the traffic flowing past him like a current, he can see the orange light glowing, holds up his free hand, hoping that the driver can see him through the heavy rain.

"You need to call Jeff in New York. He's still up, waiting for you. We were trying to get you last night."

"What's the problem?"

"Legal hitch. Two clauses they're stalling on under section . . . sig-nature . . . papers . . ." His voice is drowned out by a passing car, its tires hissing in the wet.

"I didn't catch that."

The taxi has seen him. It is slowing, sending a fine spray of water as it slows on the opposite side of the road. He spies the man farther along whose brief sprint slows in disappointment as he sees Will will get there before him. He feels a sneaking sense of triumph. "Look, get Cally to have the paperwork on my desk," he yells. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

He glances both ways, then ducks his head as he runs the last few steps across the road toward the cab, the word "Blackfriars" already on his lips. The rain is seeping down the gap between his collar and his shirt. He will be soaked by the time he reaches the office, even walking this short distance. He may have to send his secretary out for another shirt.

"And we need to get this due diligence thing worked out before Martin gets in—"

He glances up at the screeching sound, the rude blare of a horn. He sees the side of the glossy black taxi in front of him, the driver already winding down his window, and at the edge of his field of vision something he can't quite make out, something coming toward him at an impossible speed.

He turns toward it, and in that split second he realizes that he is in its path, that there is no way he is going to be able to get out of its way. His hand opens in surprise, letting the BlackBerry fall to the ground. He hears a shout, which may be his own. The last thing he sees is a leather glove, a face under a helmet, the shock in the man's eyes mirroring his own. There is an explosion as everything frag-ments.

And then there is nothing.

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2009

There are 158 footsteps between the bus stop and home, but it can stretch to 180 if you aren't in a hurry, like maybe if you're wearing platform shoes. I turned the corner onto our street (68 steps), and could just see the house—a four-bedroom semi in a row of other three- and four-bedroom semis. Dad's car was outside, which meant he had not yet left for work.

Behind me, the sun was setting behind Stortfold Castle, its dark shadow sliding down the hill like melting wax to overtake me. On a different sort of day, I could have told you all the things that had happened to me on this route: where Dad taught me to ride a bike without stabilizers; where Mrs. Doherty with the lopsided wig used to make us Welsh cakes; the hedge where Treena knocked a wasp's nest and we ran screaming all the way back to the castle.

Thomas's tricycle was upturned on the path and, closing the gate behind me, I dragged it under the porch and opened the door. The warmth hit me with the force of an air bag; Mum is a martyr to the cold and keeps the heating on all year round. Dad is always opening windows, complaining that she'd bankrupt the lot of us. He says our heating bills are larger than the GDP of a small African country.

"That you, love?"

"Yup." I hung my jacket on the peg, where it fought for space among the others.

"Which you? Lou? Treena?"

"Lou."

I peered around the living-room door. Dad was facedown on the sofa, his arm thrust deep between the cushions, as if they had

swallowed his limb whole. Thomas, my five-year-old nephew, was on his haunches, watching him intently.

"Lego." Dad turned his face toward me, puce from exertion. "Why they have to make the damned pieces so small I don't know."

"Where's Mum?"

"Upstairs. How about that? A two-pound piece!"

I looked up, just able to hear the familiar creak of the ironing board. Josie Clark, my mother, never sat down. It was a point of honor. She had been known to stand on an outside ladder painting the windows, occasionally pausing to wave, while the rest of us ate a roast dinner.

"Will you have a go at finding this bloody arm for me? He's had me looking for half an hour and I've got to get ready for work."

"Are you on nights?"

"Yeah. It's half past five."

I glanced at the clock. "Actually, it's half past four."

He extracted his arm from the cushions and squinted at his watch. "Then what are you doing home so early?"

I shook my head vaguely, as if I might have misunderstood the question, and walked into the kitchen.

Granddad was sitting in his chair by the kitchen window, studying a Sudoku. The health visitor had told us it would be good for his concentration, help his focus after the strokes. I suspected I was the only one to notice he simply filled out all the boxes with whatever number came to mind.

"Hey, Granddad."

He looked up and smiled.

"You want a cup of tea?"

He shook his head, and partially opened his mouth.

"Cold drink?"

He nodded.

I opened the fridge door. "There's no apple juice." Apple juice, I remembered now, was too expensive. "Water?"

He nodded, murmured something that could have been a thank-you as I handed him the glass.

My mother walked into the room, bearing a huge basket of neatly folded laundry. "Are these yours?" She brandished a pair of socks.

"Treena's, I think."

"I thought so. Odd color. I think they must have got in with Daddy's plum pajamas. You're back early. Are you going somewhere?"

"No." I filled a glass with tap water and drank it.

"Is Patrick coming around later? He rang here earlier. Did you have your mobile off?"

"Mm."

"He said he's after booking your holiday. Your father says he saw something on the television about it. Where is it you liked? Ipsos? Kalypsos?"

"Skiathos."

"That's the one. You want to check your hotel very carefully. Do it on the Internet. He and Daddy watched something on the news at lunchtime. Apparently they're building sites, half of those budget deals, and you wouldn't know until you got there. Daddy, would you like a cup of tea? Did Lou not offer you one?" She put the kettle on, then glanced up at me. It's possible she had finally noticed I wasn't saying anything. "Are you all right, love? You look awfully pale."

She reached out a hand and felt my forehead, as if I were much younger than twenty-six.

"I don't think we're going on holiday."

My mother's hand stilled. Her gaze had that X-ray thing that it had held since I was a kid. "Are you and Pat having some problems?"

"Mum, I—"

"I'm not trying to interfere. It's just, you've been together an awful long time. It's only natural if things get a bit sticky every now and then. I mean, me and your father, we—"

"I lost my job."

My voice cut into the silence. The words hung there, searing themselves on the little room long after the sound had died away.

"You what?"

"Frank's shutting down the café. From tomorrow." I held out a hand with the slightly damp envelope I had gripped in shock the

entire journey home. All 180 steps from the bus stop. "He's given me my three months' money."

The day had started like any other day. Everyone I knew hated Monday mornings, but I never minded them. I liked arriving early at the Buttered Bun, firing up the huge tea urn in the corner, bringing in the crates of milk and bread from the backyard, and chatting to Frank as we prepared to open.

I liked the fuggy bacon-scented warmth of the café, the little bursts of cool air as the door opened and closed, the low murmur of conversation, and, when quiet, Frank's radio singing tinnily to itself in the corner. It wasn't a fashionable place—its walls were covered in scenes from the castle up on the hill, the tables still sported Formica tops, and the menu hadn't altered since I started, apart from the addition of chocolate brownies to the iced-bun tray.

But most of all I liked the customers. I liked Kev and Angelo, the plumbers, who came in most mornings and teased Frank about where his meat might have come from. I liked the Dandelion Lady, nicknamed for her shock of white hair, who ate one egg and chips from Monday to Thursday and sat reading the complimentary newspapers and drinking her way through two cups of tea. I always made an effort to chat with her. I suspected it might be the only conversation the old woman got all day.

I liked the tourists, who stopped on their walk up to and down from the castle, the shrieking schoolchildren, who stopped by after school, the regulars from the offices across the road, and Nina and Cherie, the hairdressers, who knew the calorie count of every single item the Buttered Bun had to offer. Even the annoying customers, like the red-haired woman who ran the toy shop and disputed her change at least once a week, didn't trouble me.

I watched relationships begin and end across those tables, children transferred between ex-spouses, the guilty relief of those parents who couldn't face cooking, and the secret pleasure of pensioners at a fried breakfast. All human life came through, and most of them shared a few words with me, trading jokes or comments over the

"Funny, surprising, and heartbreaking" . . .
a thoroughly entertaining novel that captures
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Louisa Clark is an ordinary girl living an exceedingly ordinary life—steady boyfriend, close family—who has barely been farther afield than her tiny village. She takes a badly needed job working for ex-Master of the Universe Will Traynor, who is wheelchair-bound after an accident. Will has always lived a huge life—big deals, extreme sports, worldwide travel—and he is not interested in exploring a new one.

Will is acerbic, moody, bossy—but Lou refuses to treat him with kid gloves, and soon his happiness means more to her than she expected. When she learns that Will has shocking plans of his own, Lou sets out to show him that life is still worth living.

Me Before You brings to life two people who couldn't have less in common—a heartbreakingly romantic novel that asks, *What do you do when making the person you love happy also means breaking your own heart?*

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CAN. \$21.00

ISBN 978-0-14-312454-2



EAN 9 780143 124542