All You Need is Love

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Extract

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Chapter One

Sally Freeman, Single Mum and Superwoman, to the rescue once again.

'Let me take those for you, love,' I say to Mrs Kapur, who is struggling up the first flight of stairs, a heavy bag of shopping from the local Save-It supermarket in each hand.

'Lift's out again, Sally,' she mutters at me. 'Little buggers. It's the third time this week they've stuck up those buttons with chewy. I'll give them a bloody clip round the ear if I catch them.'

It would probably be the last thing that she did. Mrs Kapur's a tiny woman – all wrinkles and sinew – no match for the hulking great youths who hang around the flats looking for trouble and, invariably, finding it. I'm about a foot taller than her and I'm a little shorty myself.

Living on the tenth floor isn't easy at any age – I'm out of puff when I get up there. When you're well past pensionable age, as my lovely neighbour is, it must be a nightmare. The old lady stops and leans against the wall while she catches her breath. It's about 80 degrees out there. The sun's cracking the flags – those that haven't already been cracked for years because the Council never gets round to fixing them. Despite the heat, Mrs Kapur's still wearing a thick coat and a headscarf over her sari.

Super Sal takes the bags from her. 'Stocking up?' I ask.

'I'm out of everything,' she says with a shake of her head. 'No bog roll. No cat food.'

Technically, we are not supposed to have cats in our tower block but no one minds Mrs Kapur's big ginger moggy, Gandhi

– apart from the Council, of course. That cat's the only company she has these days. He was originally called something else, something more cat-like – Tiddles or Puss-puss – but all the residents rechristened him and it kind of stuck. Now even Mrs Kapur calls him Gandhi. 'Got my pension today, though.' She gives me a gappy smile.

'I hope you've treated yourself to a nice big cream cake.'

'I have that,' she chuckles. 'Got Gandhi a bit of fresh fish too, as well as his tins. Probably why my bags are so heavy.'

'I've told you before,' I remind her. 'I'll do your shopping for you. All you have to do is give me a knock and tell me what you want. I'm up there every day.'

'I don't like to bother you, doll.'

'I've got naff all else to do, Mrs K. It's no trouble.'

'You're a sound girl, Sally Freeman. What would I do without you?'

Get one of your lazy, good-for-nothing sons to look after you, I want to say, but I don't. She adores them all – lazy bastards that they are – and wouldn't have a word said against them. They deign to pop in for five minutes once in a blue moon and then, strangely, she never seems to be able to find her pension money when they've gone. And I thought Indian families were supposed to be close?

Hoisting up the Save-It bags, I say, 'Ready for the assault on the north face?'

She laughs at that.

Unlike other Superheroes, I don't have my own cape or Lycra outfit emblazoned with an eye-catching flash of lightning. No. All I've got is a Matalan T-shirt, charity-shop jeans – very last season – and cheap shoes off one of the stalls on Kirberly market. No silky padded knickers and star-spangled corset for this Wonder Woman.

'Come on, Mrs K. You can make me a quick cup of tea when we get to the top.' Most Superheroes get to save the world; all I do is stop frail old biddies from having heart-attacks because

some bored-senseless little shite thought it was fun to vandalise the lifts.

I put my hand under Mrs Kapur's elbow and give her a bit of encouragement up the stairs. 'Ever thought of applying to the Council for a bungalow, Mrs K? Or what about sheltered housing?' Even if she lived on the second or third floor it would have to be better than this.

She takes the steps painfully slowly, lifting one tiny foot to the next stair then a mammoth effort until the other joins it. My son, Charlie, walked like this when he was two years old. Now he's ten and he runs up here like a wildebeest with a hungry lion at its bum.

Mrs Kapur stops and takes a few laboured breaths. 'I've lived here all my life, doll. I can't move now. This is all I know. Where would I go?' She shakes her head again and her scarf falls over her eyes. I put down one of the bags and push it back for her. 'I'll be going out of here in a wooden box.'

Sooner than she'd like if she has to keep using these stairs. The Council has given up bothering to come and fix the lift, no matter how many times I ring and complain. It works for about three days – sometimes not even that long – then someone kicks in the door or pulls off the control panel. Once there was a big pile of poo in there and, frankly, I couldn't swear that it was from a dog. In my role as Superwoman, I had to clean it up, of course. I'm on first-name terms with everyone in the local Housing Department – not that it does me any good. You'd think they'd be nicer to one of their regulars. Frankly, their customer service isn't what it should be.

While we catch our breath, I'll tell you a bit more about where I live. It's what's commonly called a 'sink estate' on the outskirts of Liverpool. Our tower block – one of three on the estate – is bordered by a rag-tag of run-down Council houses and prefabs that probably should be condemned by now. Row upon row of grey, box-like houses that were built as a temporary measure during the Second World War with nothing more substantial than

Lego bricks, they still manage to defy the elements and stay standing to this day. William Shankly House – named for the legendary manager of Liverpool Football Club – was built in the late 1960s and should have been knocked down in the early 1970s. Why some bright spark thought this would be a fitting tribute to the great man, I'll never know. Bill Shankly would never have put up with this crap. He'd be spinning in his grave now, bless him, if he could see this. It's a concrete monument to all that was bad about British architecture at that time. Whoever decided that high-rise city living was desirable? Some over-paid architect living in a low-rise cottage surrounded by rolling countryside and nothing but the sound of skylarks, no doubt.

The outside of the building is unpainted pebbledash stained with dark streaks of damp that meander down its pock-marked sides. Inside isn't any better. The stairwells are dark and dingy; the lights are always on the blink, and after dark they're a mugger's paradise. As there aren't any public lavatories around here and the youths of today clearly have very weak bladders, the entrance hall is frequently used as a toilet. I wedge the front door open every day, but no amount of fresh air can get rid of the all-pervading putrid smell. When it's hot, like today, it makes you want to heave.

While Mrs K and I tackle the steps to the next floor, I'll tell you a bit about me too – other than the fact that I'm an unpaid Superwoman. I'm twenty-seven years old, but feel as if I've lived three lifetimes already. I've got lots of 'smile' lines for my age – even though, sometimes, there's not been a lot to smile about. I'm fit as a flea from climbing ten flights of stairs a dozen times a day. Think of all the money I save on expensive gym membership! You have to look on the positive side, don't you? My friend, Debs, highlights my hair every few weeks for nothing, which I like to think makes me look younger. I've got one of those trendy, short bobs – also courtesy of Debs – which is borne mainly out of a need to have low-maintenance hair because, despite being unemployed, I never seem to have time to do it.

Most of my life is devoted to my ten-year-old son, Charlie, who's the best thing that's ever happened to me. I might be crap at most things in life, but I'm a bloody good mum. Despite what the *Daily Mail* might have you believe, not all single mums are slappers, sponging off the state and spending their benefit on Smirnoff Ice.

Having vented that, I have to take a deep breath and say, perhaps needlessly, that Charlie's dad isn't around. What a charmer he turned out to be. Left me when I was six months' pregnant for a Mrs Robinson-type woman from that hotbed of sin, St Helens. Thank goodness that we never married. I reckon that I had a lucky escape. He did suggest that he do the decent thing but, to be honest, he wouldn't have known the decent thing if it had bopped him on the nose. To prove my point, I can tell you that the onetime love of my life is now a permanent guest of Her Majesty – spending his days in Walton Prison for armed robbery. In my book, that means he's given up any rights to see me or Charlie ever again.

As it happens, I left the space for the father's name blank on Charlie's birth certificate. Very wisely, as it turns out. But it's something that the Child Support Agency are a bit put out about. They probably imagined that I'd had a different fella every night and didn't know which of the lucky souls was the dad. I wish. I'd been with Charlie's dad for three years – not exactly a flash in the pan. To call him my childhood sweetheart might be pushing it a bit, but we met at school when we were fourteen. He'd been my only proper boyfriend; the only person I'd ever slept with. I wasn't like my mates either, crossing their fingers as their favoured method of contraception. Charlie was the result of a dodgy condom – must have been. In my mind I was being really careful. We never, ever did it without protection. And look what happened. I wonder, one day, will all single mums rally together to sue condom manufacturers? If I'd known about the morning-after pill – or if it had even existed then – my life could have turned out very different.

All my big career plans, such as they were, went out of the window once my squawking bundle of joy was born. I had to abandon my childcare course at the local Technical College, which I'd only just started. But what little I did learn certainly came in handy. Now I feel older – much older – and wiser. And I wouldn't change a thing, as Charlie – now a ten-year-old grunting bundle of pre-teen angst – has brought me nothing but happiness. He's my sole reason for getting out of bed in the morning.

Now we're at the top landing and we both stop and puff for a bit. Even if you're fit and a Superhero, this is a long way up. My flat's opposite Mrs Kapur's on the top floor and just a bit further down the landing. I got the flat when I was seventeen. I'd just had Charlie and, believe me, I was *so* grateful at the time. I didn't know where else I was going to go. Mum had not long since died and I knew that I couldn't stay in the house with Dad. You don't want to bring up a baby around a raging drunk, do you? I could never have left Charlie alone with him. The man just wasn't safe. He'd always had a drink problem, but with Mum gone he went completely to pieces. One minute he'd be sober and all smiles, the next – when he'd had a few too many bevvies – he'd be crashing round the place, cursing fit to make Gordon Ramsay blush and trying to pick a fight with the telly. Anyway, he's gone too now. I know it sounds harsh, but good riddance, I say. He never was a father to me.

I look round at the peeling paint and listen to Mrs Kapur's breathless wheezing. This place felt like a sanctuary when I first moved in, my own little oasis, somewhere I could call home. I didn't even mind lugging the pram up ten flights of stairs. Funny how your opinion changes over the years.

Chapter Two

I unpacked Mrs Kapur's shopping for her too. Not that she had much, bless her. There's hardly anything in her cupboards. I felt guilty taking a cuppa from her *and* she wanted to share her cream cake. She's such a love. Turns out she'd only bought the cake because today was its sell-by date and she'd got it half price. Is this what our poor pensioners are reduced to? Buying about-to-go-off cream cakes? Makes you proud to be British, eh?

Now I'm back in my flat, I go to see what's lurking in my own kitchen cupboards. It's not exactly a treasure trove of gourmet delights in here either, but Charlie and I never go hungry – that's one thing I'm very particular about. The rest of the kids round here seem to exist on nothing but pizza and turkey twizzlers. I'd rather not pay my leccy bill than go without food. I'm sure my power company don't feel quite the same. They'd rather see us starve. Bastards. I make sure that Charlie gets fresh veg every day; at the worst, when times are hard, frozen peas. He can only have cola once a day. And I buy the cheap crap from Save-It, so he actually doesn't like it that much. He just complains about it because that's what kids do. No doubt he thinks I'm a mingy old bat, but I tell him it's for his own good. One day when he's big and strong and has all his own teeth and isn't dying of obesity or heart disease, he'll thank me.

Glancing at my watch, I realise that I'd better get moving if I'm going to get to my computer course on time. Sorting out Mrs Kapur has taken much longer than I bargained for, so now

food will have to wait. Unfortunately, my exemplary dietary habits only extend to when my son's here.

Probably couldn't eat, anyway. This is only the third week of my course and I'm still feeling very nervous about the whole thing. It's the first time that I've ever done anything for myself – just for me – and there's a certain amount of anxiety involved in that as I'm *so* determined not to fail. I was completely useless at school, mainly because I used to spend half my nights looking after Mum when she was ill, so all that I wanted to do during the day was put my head down on the desk and go to sleep. Often, I did. Then I ditched my college course when I got knocked up. So, this is the first time I've ventured back into any form of education since then and, frankly, I'm bricking it.

There's a knock at the door and I know who it is. I also know that I don't have time for this. Sighing inwardly, I go to open it. As I suspected, Johnny's standing there. His little dog Ringo's at his feet, as always.

'I've got five minutes and then I've got to go,' I tell him as I walk away from the door.

Johnny and Ringo follow me into the living room, where I start to check whether I've got my phone, my purse, my notebook, my pen.

'I came to see if you wanted me to pick Charlie up from school,' Johnny says to my back.

'You could have phoned me.'

Johnny shrugs apologetically. 'I was out and about.' He stands awkwardly, filling the small room.

Softening, I smile at him. I've nothing to be cross with Johnny about, for goodness' sake. Plus it's very hard to stay mad when he's around. He grins back at me, running his hands through his shock of dark hair, which always looks as if it's been styled by a Saturday girl. 'Thanks, Johnny. You're a mate.'

At that, his smile fades. Even Ringo looks at me with limpid eyes, tail tucked between his legs. I guess the worst thing that

you can tell someone who's in love with you is that he's a mate. Even their dog gets naffed off.

Okay, so this is how it is. Not too long ago, Johnny and I were more than just mates. John Paul George Jones – even his dad, the world's biggest Beatles fan, balked at adding Ringo to his son's names – and I were together for about five years. On-off. Off-on. It was always me that called it off and always me that asked him to come back. Johnny might be irritatingly laid-back, but he's also a hard person to live without.

I finally split with him about six months ago, this time for good. Honestly. It was horrible and really hard, because – essentially – there's nothing really wrong with Johnny. (Apart from the dodgy name, of course.) He's handsome, funny and, to be honest, pretty fab in bed. He's great at remembering to take the bins out. He knows what to do with the working end of a Black & Decker. He can use the washing machine. What more could I want in a fella? you might ask. It's just that he and I have different ideas about how we should live our lives. I'm trying to better myself. I don't want Charlie to spend all his life here. I want to get out of this dead-end place, make a nicer life for us. I'm not sure where yet, but I know that the universe doesn't begin and end in Liverpool. I'm going places. I have ambition.

Johnny, on the other hand, has none. He's a dreamer, drifting through his life, being buffeted along by the current, going where it takes him. Which doesn't seem to be any further than the end of his street. I can't do that. And I can't be with someone who thinks like that. It's dragging me down, keeping me under, pinning me to this place. He's happy here, happy with his lot. He loves the place. Johnny doesn't have a full-time job because he's the primary carer for his mum and that doesn't really bother him – and I think it should. He's young, fit, bright – he should want more. He doesn't think what else might be out there, just waiting around the corner, if only he'd try to stretch himself. I'm sure my former lover thinks that people like us shouldn't have ambition. That we should be content with our given place down in

the gutter of the planet. But I can't do piss poor for the rest of my life. I've had enough of it. I want more. And that's what's driven us apart. Simple as that.

The Government have started up a 'Back to Work' programme round here – or, as I like to put it, a 'Get Off Bloody Benefits and Earn Your Own Way, You Miserable Scroungers' programme. Because it's free and held just down the road from me, I've signed on for 'Computing for Beginners' – proof that I've moved on and have begun to build the kind of life that I want for me and Charlie. Okay, so I'm never going to be the next Bill Gates, but it's a step in the right direction, yeah? I'm twenty-seven, for goodness' sake – positively a raddled old bird to be thinking of taking on the world of work for the first time – and I'll admit that there's a panic welling inside me that if I don't do something now to break away, then I never will. I'll be stuck here for ever like Mrs Kapur, grunting up the stairs with my meagre shopping and my cream cakes that are on the turn until the Grim Reaper comes for me.

To be honest, I'm not sure that computing is entirely my bag. I don't really see myself as nine-to-five office material, but it's a start. Everyone needs to know about computers, right? Even the telly seems to be a complicated beast these days with its digital and analogue and terrestrial and Freeview and all that stuff. You need a flipping degree to get it to record *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*. And at least I'm *doing* something.

'Shall I go and get Charlie then?'

'What?' I'd forgotten that Johnny was still waiting patiently for my answer.

'I remembered that you were at your course today and wondered if I should meet Charlie. I'm sure he'd like to see Ringo.'

'Oh,' I say, all thoughts of doom and gloom receding. 'That's nice. Thanks, Johnny.' Charlie's being bullied at the moment, probably because I can't afford the latest trainers for him. You know what kids are like. Little bastards. Every one of them except my own, of course.

'I miss him,' Johnny says quietly.

The hardest part about this break-up is that Johnny adores Charlie and, for better, for worse, Charlie adores Johnny. But am I supposed to stay with a man simply because my son loves him more than I do? I've spent many nights lying awake at three o'clock worrying about this. If I could get air miles for my guilt trip, I'd be in the Bahamas now.

When he was younger and Johnny and I broke up, it didn't really matter to Charlie. A day, a week or even a month . . . as a child you just don't register the passing of time; it could be ages before he'd cotton on to the fact that Johnny wasn't around. Now, of course, it's very different. Charlie, unfortunately, has his own opinions on the matter. Frequently, they seem to differ from mine.

'I know you miss him. He misses you too.' I sling my bag on my shoulder, indicating that it's time for me to leave as I try to ignore those nipping guilty feelings again. 'You know that you can come round to see him anytime you want. Why don't you stay for your tea tonight? We're only having pasta. I can throw a bit more in. Stretch the mince between the three of us.'

'I'd like that,' Johnny says, and I can't look at him because his voice sounds choked.

Johnny hasn't moved on. As I said, Johnny, I'm sure, is still in love with me. What can I do?

I give a little tsk at my watch. 'I've got to go,' I say. Avoid the issue, that's what.

Chapter Three

Crossing the road, I head off to my computer course. The organisation that's running it has taken over a council house that previously looked like it had been bombed out. To be fair, they've given it a lick of paint inside, mended the smashed windows and, what was a separate lounge and dining room have now been knocked together to form one big space. There are eight computers in there and the course has a full house. I had to wait six months to get a place.

It's been a long, hot summer. Now it's early September and the weather is still bestowing its blessings on us. Frankly, I love global warming. I'm guilt-free when it comes to my carbon footprint, since I don't have a car, I've been on a plane twice in my life, I'm frugal with my power consumption because I can't afford not to be, and I use my Save-It Bag For Life every day because now they have the audacity to charge 5p if you want a new one. The only benefit I get out of all this is the nice sunshine. Bring it on!

All the grass at the front of the house has been burned to a nice brown crisp by the sun and is waiting patiently for the rain to return. I swing in through the open front door, humming to myself. This is the third week of my course, and it's fair to say that I'm not proving to be a natural. To be honest, I'm even struggling to remember how to turn the damn thing on. In my own defence, my only skirmishes with technology so far have been programming the DVD and making calls on my mobile phone. I haven't even used a typewriter, so this whole computing thing is just a bit scary.

I go in and head for the computer that I've bagged as mine. It's near the window, so if I get too bored I can stare out to see if there's anything happening on the estate. Which there never is. Not that I've had much time to do that in previous lessons. I know all the other people on the course, but I won't bother to introduce them because, frankly, they're not that interesting. They're mainly all dossers from this estate, long-term unemployed and social misfits. There's a couple of car thieves, each supposedly turning over a new leaf – which will be a severe blow to the second-hand car market round here. There's a disabled guy, Tom, who comes in his wheelchair and he's the best of us all. But then he spends the rest of his life playing computer games, so technically he should be. Davy in the corner is a career burglar. He can rob you anything you want to order. Not sure how much use a computer will be to him in his business ventures. He already knows that he can pick one up and run through the door with it or lob it out of the open window to his waiting accomplice – does he need to know any more? Is he going to do a spreadsheet to make sure he doesn't burgle the same place twice? Make a pie chart of the house most worth plundering?

I look round as I take my place. I'm the only single mum. Another drain on society, right? I'm the only woman on the course, in fact. No girlie chats to pass the time for me. This lot mean business and, unusually for Scousers, hardly say a word. They get their heads down and crack on. But I shouldn't be scathing about the others, it's mean of me. You're hardly going to get lawyers in pinstripe suits on Government-funded courses on sink estates. These guys are only here trying their best. Like me. Maybe they, too, have realised that there might be a better way.

Our tutor is waiting for us. And – I can't entirely blame this on the wonderful weather – I go all hot. Think computers and you think, baldy bloke with greying, bushy beard wearing Jesus sandals with brown socks. Am I right? Spencer Knight, our tutor, is *well* far removed from that. He is one hot mother. Actually,

no – *I'm* the hot mother! I can feel myself redden in unusual places as he comes over. What looks like measles springs out all over my chest.

'Hello, Sally,' he says.

'Hiya. Sorry I'm late.'

'You're not late.'

No, I'm not. I'm bang on time. It's just that I have no idea what else to say. My tongue, which seems to have expanded to twice its normal size, is now lolling uselessly in my mouth. There's a hint of a smile at Spencer's lips. I think he might be laughing at me.

'Have you managed to do any practice this week?'

I shrug. 'Haven't got a computer.'

'Sorry,' he says. 'I forgot. Would you like me to see if I can get hold of one for you?'

He could do worse than ask Davy. That's about all I could afford to pay, knock-off prices. 'It'd have to be cheap,' I say. 'But that'd be sound.'

'Sound?'

'Great,' I correct. 'That would be great.' Spencer's not from round here. He's from somewhere posh. He talks like the Queen. Everything comes out with massive long vowels. He doesn't say 'yeah', he says 'yaaah'. We all have to repeat most of our sentences so that he understands us. Everyone round here has a really thick Scouse accent; it comes with the turf and it can be hard to get your head round. But I try very hard to speak nicely and still he doesn't understand a word I'm saying!

Spencer Knight doesn't dress like us either. This estate is shell-suit city – shiny nylon rules. In a place where putting on the latest Liverpool or Everton football shirt is considered dressing up, Spencer's style stands out a bit. Today, he's wearing an ice-blue tailored shirt over black trousers with fine, blue pin-stripes in them. The shirt has enormous cuffs with huge cufflinks in them. His brown hair's all ruffled up. But it's a stylish mess – a fifty-quid cut – not like Johnny's, which is a plain and simple

mess. He's got the most flawless skin I've ever seen on a man and I bet if I peeked in his bathroom cabinet, I'd find a whole range of expensive moisturising products. He's probably thirty, maybe even a couple of years older, but he looks like he's had a life of ease. His demeanour speaks of exotic holidays, business-class travel and fast cars. His eyes are clear blue, offset perfectly by the shirt, and when I look at them my mouth goes dry. No one's eyes have done that to me before. In short, Spencer looks like a catalogue model. But in a good way. I'm talking Versace rather than Littlewoods.

My jeans and T-shirt feel cheap and nasty in comparision and I've never really noticed that kind of stuff before. For the first time in my life, I wish I had stacks of designer labels in my wardrobe. Trouble is, if you wear labels round here then everyone assumes that they're fakes or knock-offs. No one would be stupid enough to pay the prices they want for the real McCoy.

The other students are all here now. One's a builder who wants to do his accounts on his computer – must have had a tug from the tax man and has seen the error of his ways. I haven't had a chance to talk to the other two yet, so we nod our hellos and then I switch on and try to pick up where we left off last week – creating a Word document. Despite my fears, I can actually remember what we did, even though there's been a heap of other useless crap through my brain since then.

When we're settled in, Spencer does a tour of the class, moving us onto the next part of the workbook. He gets to me and scoots a chair up next to mine, resting his arm across the back of it. My heart beats faster and it's not just because I think he's going to find fault with what I'm doing. My fingers hit all the wrong keys.

'Looks good,' he says over my shoulder. Despite it being like an oven in here, Spencer is as cool as a cucumber. The Council might have stretched to a new coat of paint and some computers for this place, but it didn't think about air-conditioning, and the windows are screwed shut.

I smile shyly at him. 'Thanks.' Then he sits and watches me while I type, arms folded, legs stretched out. His shoes are amazing. I know very little about shoes, but I'd bet a pound that they're handmade. I'd swear that his socks are silk too. I look at him and wonder what he's doing here, down among the low-lifes and the socially-deserted.

'You're staring at me,' he says, giving me a smile that offers a glimpse of his perfectly white, perfectly spaced teeth.

'Sorry, sorry.' I switch back to my computer, embarrassed to have been caught out, and bash at the keys again.

He leans towards me. 'I rather like it,' he says.

'I was just admiring your shoes.'

Spencer laughs at that. 'My shoes?' He stares at his own feet, shaking his head. 'My shoes.'

'They're nice,' I say a little crisply. So I like his shoes – so what? It's no big deal. I'm not asking him to marry me.

'Thank you.' Spencer puts a hand on my chair and swivels me towards him. His face is very close to mine and he smells wonderful, of freshly laundered clothes, soap and expensive after-shave. Even his scent is out of place here and I want to inhale him, fill my senses with him, drive the smell of damp and piss and poverty out of my brain. He glances over at the others, but they're all engrossed in their work. 'This is probably highly inappropriate behaviour,' he says, lowering his voice. 'But would you let me buy you dinner tomorrow night?'

'Dinner?'

'Or a drink. You're not busy, are you?'

Busy? *Moi?*

'Dinner's great.'

'I'll pick you up at eight.'

'I'll meet you somewhere.' There's no way I want him coming to the flats.

'I know where you live,' he says. 'It's on the register. I thought we'd drive out somewhere. I'll come for you.'

He knows where I live and yet he still wants to ask me out!

I nod. 'Okay.'

'Sound,' he says in his cut-glass tones as he stands up, a smile curling his lips. He's teasing me but, for some strange reason, I really don't mind.