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Opening Extract from...

Scandalous

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PROLOGUE

In a private screening room in Beverly Hills, a beautiful woman stared intently at the man on the screen. Flicking a switch, she allowed her luxurious red velvet chair to recline. Languidly extending a hand dripping in Neil Lane diamonds, she reached for the remote, freeze-framing the shot on the man's face. She smiled.

He was handsome, undoubtedly. Blond, blue-eyed, chisel-jawed, like every other television presenter in Los Angeles. But this woman had her pick of handsome men. Handsome, rich, powerful, she had had them all and grown bored of them all. Last month, for the third year in a row, *People* magazine had voted her 'Sexiest Woman Alive'. It was the sort of label that meant little to her, but everything to the producers and directors who lined up to be the next piece of man candy on her perfectly sculpted arm. Her looks had made her famous, and they had made her rich. Men were stupid.

But not this man. This man was different. He was an intellectual. Some even called him a genius. She wondered what he would be like in bed? How it would feel to sleep

with a man who, on one level at least, was her superior? She found the concept thrilling, albeit rather difficult to imagine.

Hitting play, she watched the man walk towards the camera, talking about deep space and the cosmos and things she did not understand in his divine English accent. Slipping a hand beneath her cream silk La Perla negligée, she began to touch herself, imagining him making love to her.

Theo! Oh Theo. Don't stop.

As always when she pleasured herself, she came to orgasm almost instantly. Yet another thing she did better than the men in her life. Opening her eyes, she sighed. How inconvenient that she'd only just got married again.

She would have to do something about that . . .

Three thousand miles away and some years later, in New York, another wealthy, beautiful woman watched the same man on the cinema-sized plasma television in the master bedroom of her palatial Upper East Side apartment. Just as she had watched him every night for the last five years.

Unlike his admirer in LA, this woman *did* understand what Professor Theodore Dexter was saying. Listening to him pontificate in the fake, fireside-chat voice she knew so well, she thought, *I hate you. Why are you still alive? Why aren't you suffering, the way you made me suffer, you treacherous son of a bitch?*

One day, she vowed, Theo Dexter would get what was coming to him.

When that day came, she would show him no mercy.

PART ONE

Eight years earlier . . .

CHAPTER ONE

'Are you sure you want to do this Sasha? It's not too late to change your mind.'

Sasha Miller looked at Will Temple's naked body – the six-pack stomach, broad rugby-player's shoulders, sturdy legs, and of course *it* – and marvelled again that such an Adonis had chosen her to be his girlfriend.

'I'm completely sure. I just . . . I hope you won't be disappointed, that's all.'

Will Temple was nineteen and *very* experienced. At least, that's what he'd told Sasha. *Oh God, yeah. I lost my virginity when I was twelve. It was with the au pair. Bodil. Gorgeous Swedish bird, couldn't keep her hands off me. She's a top model now.* Sasha was wildly impressed. Not that that was why she had fallen for Will. All the girls loved him because he was captain of the rugby team at school, handsome, rich and insanely popular. But Sasha Miller was drawn to another side of Will Temple. He was funny, and spontaneous. When he wasn't with 'the lads', his posse of sycophantic hangers-on from Tonbridge, the local public school, he could be loving and sweet.

Sasha and Will had been an item for three months now. If Sasha didn't do the deed soon, she knew there'd be a queue of girls from St Agnes's waiting to take her place. She'd only been putting it off because of the rumours.

Rumours about *it.*

For weeks Sasha had been hearing that *it* was so huge, an appendage of such superhuman girth and elephantine length that sex was bound to be agony. So it was with immense relief that Sasha had watched Will drop his Simpsons boxer shorts to reveal a modest five and a half inches of manhood. Eager, certainly. Ready for action, unquestionably. But hardly the Eiffel Tower.

'You could never disappoint me, darling,' Will assured her. 'Just follow my lead. I'll take care of you.'

Kicking aside a pile of dirty sports kit, Will led Sasha to the bed and started taking off her clothes. Sasha closed her eyes. Downstairs she could hear the *thump, thump, thump* of music from the party and wondered if all Will's friends knew what he was up to. *Did boys talk to each other about things like that?* She tried not to think about it, or about the faint but pervasive smell of mildew rising from Will's sheets.

'What's wrong with this thing?' Will fumbled with the clasp of her bra. 'Why won't it . . . open?'

'Sorry. It's quite old.' Hearing the exasperation in his voice Sasha wriggled out of the offending garment herself. Two perfectly round, full, eighteen-year-old breasts tumbled into Will's hands like ripe fruit from the tree of heaven.

'Bloody hell, you're gorgeous,' he gasped.

He was right. With her flawless, milky skin, gleaming mane of black hair and sparkling, intelligent eyes, the same pale green as mint ice cream, Sasha Miller was a knockout. But she was also . . . different. All Will Temple's previous girlfriends had been the cool, popular girls at school.

Standard-issue blondes with tight jeans and the latest Topshop heels. With her Marks & Spencer's cardigans and sensible lace-up shoes, and her nose permanently stuck in a science book, Sasha Miller was a card-carrying nerd. But that was what Will loved about her. He'd had his fill of dating prom queens. Sasha knew even less about fashion than Will did, and either didn't know that she was beautiful or set no store by her looks. She also had no interest in the local Sussex party scene, a scene of which Will Temple was the undisputed king.

But even kings could get bored.

Sasha gazed up at him, naked and adoring.

'Thank you. You're gorgeous too Will. I . . .'

The pain was sharp but it was over in a second. Sasha didn't even remember Will taking her knickers off, but he must have because before her head hit the pillow he was inside her, pounding away like a jackhammer. Tentatively Sasha ran a hand over his bare back. She was debating whether or not it would be bad form to reach lower and stroke his bum – perhaps she ought to have spent more time reading the *Just Seventeen* problem pages when she was younger like the rest of her friends? – when Will let out a strange, yelping noise and pulled out of her.

'Would you like a condom?' Sasha offered helpfully. 'I've got one.'

'A bit late for that, I'm afraid.' Will grinned. 'Sorry, darling. You're so sexy I couldn't help myself. I didn't hurt you, did I?'

'Erm, no. Not really.'

Wow. So that was sex. It was quite a lot shorter than I expected. But that's probably only because Will's so good at it, it doesn't take him as long as other people.

'Shall we go back down and join the party?' Will was

already pulling on his jeans. 'Of course I'd much rather be here, making love to you.' He kissed Sasha on the forehead. 'But I feel a bit rude. You know, being the host and everything. Jago's probably nicking the silverware as I speak.'

Will's parents were on holiday in Spain. With a faith in their eldest son that owed more to love than judgement, they had left Will in charge of Chittenden, their beautiful sixteenth-century farmhouse in the Sussex Weald. Tonight's party was his third in as many days.

'Oh, gosh, totally. Of course. You should go down.' Sasha scoured the floor for her underwear. 'I have to get home anyway.'

'You're not staying over?' Will looked genuinely crestfallen. Sasha sighed. *He's so lovely.*

'I can't. It's my dad's birthday, remember? I promised him I'd be home for supper. Mum and I always watch him unwrap his presents.'

'Hmmm. Well, I suppose that's fair enough. After all, I've already unwrapped *my* present.' Will pulled Sasha to her feet and kissed her on the lips. She felt ready to burst with happiness.

Will Temple loves me.

Will Temple has made love *to me.*

I am a woman at last!

Chittenden was in the village of Tidebrook, about a ten-minute drive from Sasha's parents' cottage in Frant. It was just past seven o'clock, and the last rays of summer sun were still sinking into the woody, Sussex horizon. *I love it here,* thought Sasha, driving through the familiar countryside. *I'll miss it when I go away to Exeter.*

In a few weeks Sasha would have her A-level results. Not

that there was ever much doubt what her grades would be. Sasha Miller had been a straight-A student since she started school at four years old. By that age she could already read fluently, and knew considerably more about the solar system than her primary school teacher, Miss Rush.

'I hesitate to use the word "obsession",' Miss Rush told Sasha's father at her first parent–teacher meeting. 'But Sasha is inordinately interested in space. I'm wondering if you could try to introduce some other interests? Just to create a balance.'

'Such as what?' Don Miller, Sasha's father, was a keen amateur astronomer himself. He shared his daughter's delight in the unknown world of stars and planets, and wasn't sure he liked the cut of Miss Rush's jib.

'A lot of the little girls are keen on princesses.'

'Princesses?'

'Yes. Princesses. Mermaids. Even the dreaded Barbie!' Miss Rush let out a tinkling little laugh. Don Miller shot her a withering stare.

'It might help her make friends, Mr Miller. Sasha . . . how shall I put this? She doesn't quite fit in.'

Sasha never did learn how to fit in. Princesses, mermaids and Barbies passed her by in much the same way that in later years drugs, nightclubs and celebrity culture remained a deliberately closed book. Thankfully, as she grew older, her teachers became more encouraging of Sasha's 'obsession' with astronomy, and her emerging genius at physics.

'Your daughter is a uniquely gifted scientist, Mr and Mrs Miller.' Mrs Banks, the headmistress of St Agnes's, stated the obvious. 'We have high hopes for her at university.' Don and Susan Miller had strained every financial sinew to afford their daughter's private school fees. They had high hopes too.

'What about Oxbridge?'

'Well.' Mrs Banks shifted uncomfortably in her high-backed wooden chair. 'That's certainly a possibility. Of course, Oxford and Cambridge both require interviews.'

Nobody doubted Sasha's intellectual ability. It was her social skills that had always been the problem. Speaking in public was her worst nightmare. But even speaking in private could be a challenge, if the subject didn't interest her. These days, Cambridge colleges were looking for more than straight-A grades. They wanted 'rounded' students. Pretty, confident girls who could hold their own at interview. Sasha was fine once you got her onto particle physics or the latest debates raging in game theory. But she had no facility for small talk. As for the dreaded UCAS form, with its two pages devoted to 'Hobbies and Other Interests', Sasha could only stare at it in bafflement. *Why would somebody need to have* another *interest, when their specialist subject was the entire universe?*

Sasha applied to the five universities with the best reputations in her subject. None of them required interviews. All five offered her a place. She decided that, if Cambridge rejected her, she would go to Exeter, and she did her best to look forward to the prospect. But deep down she knew that the Cambridge physics faculty was the best in the world. She desperately longed to get in.

The staff at St Agnes's suggested she go to an interview coach to address her weaknesses as a candidate. 'Even something as simple as wearing the right clothes can be crucially important.' But Don Miller was having none of it.

'Ridiculous. It's a travesty. Sash wants to be a scientist, not a television presenter. It's blatant sexism.'

He was right. It *was* blatant sexism.

Unfortunately, the school was right too. Sasha's interview

at St Michael's College, Cambridge, was an unmitigated disaster.

On the drive back to Sussex, Sasha glumly ran through a postmortem for her dad.

'They asked me about politics. What I thought about the latest G7 summit and whether I had strong views on globalization.'

'Why?'

'I've no idea, Dad.'

'Well, what did you say, love?'

'I said "no".'

Fair enough. Bloody silly question anyway.

'What else did they ask?'

'The Tutor for Admissions asked me what I thought I would bring to St Michael's.'

Don Miller brightened. 'And what did you say to that?'

'Books.'

'Ah.'

Oh well. Exeter's a fine university. I'm sure she'll be happy there.

The Millers' cottage was a tiny, higgledy-piggledy tile-hung gem overlooking Frant village green. All Sasha's classmates from St Agnes's lived in far grander houses – houses like Will's – but Sasha would not have traded her childhood home for Buckingham Palace. She loved everything about it: the hanging flower baskets dripping jasmine on either side of the front door; the minuscule leaded windows that let in almost no light, but that gave the house the look of Hansel and Gretel's cottage; the long, sloping back garden, a tangled mish-mash of weeds and wild flowers, with the shed at the bottom housing Sasha's precious telescope, her most treasured possession.

By the time Sasha parked her dilapidated red Golf beside the green, it was twilight. The church's ancient Saxon steeple jutted proudly over the village roof tops, a benevolent giant bathed in the blue light of evening. As Sasha got out of the car, a single note of the church bell marked the half hour. Summer smells of warm earth, freshly mown grass and honeysuckle hung heavy in the air. Sasha breathed them in, dizzy with happiness. *Will loves me.*

Before tonight, she'd been nervous about leaving him in October. Will had gone straight from school into his father's estate agency business – *I never fancied uni, Sash. I'm not the type*. The idea of leaving him in Sussex, prey to all the St Agnes's girls in the year below, filled Sasha with horror. Especially as Exeter was so terribly far away. But now that they were sleeping together – *Goodbye, virginity! I won't miss you* – she felt blissfully secure in the relationship. She would read books on the subject and become a fabulous, inventive lover. Will, consumed with desire, would hurtle down the A303 every weekend, desperate to be with her. Afterwards they would lie awake at night, staring at the stars, talking about . . . Hmmm, the fantasy got a little vague at that point. But anyway, it would all be wonderful and perfect and . . .

'Sasha! Where have you been? We've been trying your mobile all day. Dad was about to call the hospitals.'

Sue Miller, Sasha's mother, was a plumper, shorter version of her daughter. Her once black hair was now heavily laced with grey, but her pale skin was still smooth. More worldly and sensible than Sasha (not that that was hard; the family poodle, Bijoux, had more common sense than Sasha), Sue had no idea how she and Don had produced such an intellectual powerhouse of a child. Don reckoned it was his genes. But then Don was out of his mind.

'Sorry. I must have switched it off. Or something . . .'

Sasha rummaged absentmindedly in her handbag. Where *was* that phone? 'Is it birthday-supper time? I'm starving.'

'Not yet.' Don Miller appeared in the hallway. He was holding a large envelope. 'This arrived for you in the afternoon post, Sasha. I think you should open it now. Get it out of the way.'

Despite herself, Sasha's heart lurched when she saw the Cambridge postmark.

'St Michael's.'

She already knew she hadn't got in. But the weight of the envelope confirmed it. Everyone knew that if you were accepted, they sent you a fat package full of bumf about grants and accommodation and reading lists. This, quite clearly, was a single sheet of paper.

Sasha wandered through into the kitchen. Don started to follow her, but Sue held him back.

'Leave it, love. Give her a minute. She doesn't need an audience.'

In the kitchen, Sasha stood with her back to the Aga, turning the envelope over in her hands. Sensing her anxiety, Bijoux heaved his fat form out of the dog basket and sat loyally at her feet.

'Thanks, boy.' *Why did the stupid rejection have to arrive today?* She wanted to remember this as the day Will Temple made her a woman. Not the day that St Michael's Stupid College rejected her because she didn't know about globalization and her cardigan was buttoned up wrong.

Wrapping her anger around her like a cloak, Sasha tore open the letter.

On the other side of Frant village green, the Carmichael family was enjoying a summer barbecue with friends when they heard the scream.

'What was that?' Katie Carmichael put down her beer and moved towards the garden gate.

'Nothing.' Her dad, Bob, turned over the last batch of Wall's pork sausages. 'Just some kids playing silly buggers. Any chance of another jug of Pimm's out here, Kelly? It's thirsty work, you know, slaving over hot coals.'

But Bob Carmichael's wife wasn't listening. She was standing at an upstairs window, staring open mouthed at the spectacle unfolding before her.

'Oh my God!' Katie Carmichael had reached the gate. 'It's Mr Miller. He's got no clothes on.'

'You what? Don Miller?'

Bob Carmichael dropped his tongs. Half the village was outside now, pouring onto the green. Some of them were taking photographs. Most of them were laughing, or screaming, or both. Everyone knew Don Miller. He'd run the local post office for the last fifteen years, not to mention heading the Frant Neighbourhood Watch Committee.

Now it was Don that the neighbourhood had come to watch. Stark naked, whooping for joy, he tore round the cricket pitch screaming. 'She did it! She bloody did it!'

'He's flipped his lid.'

'I don't believe it. Don Miller!'

'That's put me right off me sausages, that has.'

'Where's Sue?'

A few moments later Sue Miller's solid, dumpy figure could be seen waddling towards the growing crowd of spectators, most of whom were now cheering loudly. The last time Don had felt compelled to take all his clothes off had been the night of his twenty-second birthday when England had beaten the All Blacks at Twickenham. It was a sight Sue would never forget, and one she'd hoped she'd never have to see again. Don, however, was clearly having the time of his life, playing

to the crowd with a series of pirouettes and other improvised ballet moves. His plié left nothing to the imagination.

'I'm sorry about this, everyone.' Sue Miller smiled sheepishly. 'I'm afraid Don's gone rather off the deep end.'

'No kidding!' Bob Carmichael wiped away tears of laughter. 'It's his birthday, isn't it? Is he drunk?'

'Not yet, but he will be. We just heard.' Sue's smile turned into a grin. 'Sasha got into Cambridge.'

Three hours later, Don Miller was in bed, snoring loudly. The combination of the excitement, Sue's homemade chocolate fudge birthday cake and at least a bottle and a half of the best red wine the Abergavenny Arms had to offer had finished him off, poor man.

'I knew you'd do it. I jush knew it!' he told Sasha repeatedly as he staggered upstairs, leaning on her for support like an exhausted boxer. 'You're going to be the greatesht scientist this country's ever prd'ced. My daughter. You're gonna change the world. I *knew* it.'

'D'you think he'll be all right, Mum?' Sasha closed the bedroom door.

'Don't worry about your father,' said Sue. 'It's the rest of the village that's going to need counselling. Post-traumatic shock, I think they call it. I'm used to seeing your father's wedding tackle swinging in the wind, but poor Mrs Anderson. She looked like she was about to have an aneurism. I mean, she is ninety-two, the dear old stick.'

Sasha got ready for bed in a daze. She'd had a few drinks herself, but that wasn't the reason. In the last few hours, her life had changed forever. She'd called Will to tell him the good news as soon as she got back from the pub.

'Great, babe,' he yelled over pounding music. Evidently the party at Chittenden was still in full swing. 'Cambridge

is miles nearer than Exeter. That means I can still play rugby on Saturday afternoons once the season starts, then drive up and take you out for dinner. Wicked.'

If it wasn't quite the reaction she'd hoped for, Sasha tried not to be disappointed. *I can't expect him to understand. He's not academic. He has other qualities. And at least he's making plans to come up and see me. That has to be a good sign, doesn't it?*

Pulling on a pair of scratchy cotton pyjamas she'd had since she was fourteen, Sasha turned out the light and crawled under the covers of her single bed. Above her, a solar system of glow-in-the-dark stickers shone a comforting green. It was a child's bedroom and Sasha loved it. *But I'm not a child. Not any more. I'm a Cambridge undergraduate! I'm Will Temple's lover!* She hugged her excitement to her like a priceless treasure. *I don't want to fall asleep. I don't want today to be over.*

Outside, the church bells struck midnight.

The day was over.

Sasha Miller slept.