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Opening Extract from...

Maya

Written by Alastair Campbell

Published by Hutchinson

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MAYA

Alastair Campbell

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Preface

How lucky is that . . . I got to see an eagle on my very first day here. It was a wondrous surprise, its sudden emergence around the white pine trees at the far end of the water, a deep, hard-edged croak its only signal of imminent arrival. I watched it hover before it began a mesmerising flight from one end of the lake to the other. Mrs Crowley, the colourfully dressed woman who is renting me this log cabin, had said there was an outside chance I might see one. Like most Americans, she's prone to enthusiasm, so I didn't give it much thought. And then, there it came, just hours after I'd unpacked, vast wings outstretched, swooping then gliding, with a soft whooshing sound as it passed right in front of me, maybe fifty feet above the placid water, king of all it surveyed, and, for these moments, of all who surveyed it from their boats and lake-side bungalows.

Maybe it takes the kind of experience I've had fully to appreciate natural beauty like this, but as the bald eagle finally disappeared from view, to the sound of children across the lake hollering in delight, I put my pen between my lips, and sat back to take in my surroundings. There are worse places to reflect on what has happened, and try to make sense of it. The calmness of the water helps. Everything is so still here.

It's out of season, so there are few tourists. The houses are fairly far apart, some hidden by trees, each one served by its own dirt track to the main road about a mile away. It's rare that the sound of a car engine disturbs the peace. That is left to birdsong, or an occasional speedboat pulling a waterskier, and, less frequently, excited screams as someone makes the sixty-foot leap into the water from a mossy lookout ledge on the orange cliff-side opposite. According to Mrs Crowley it's a coming-of-age dare for all who live round here. She says not to try it. 'The water's way too cold for outsiders at this time of year.'

At least now I'll be able to remember the bald eagle as a thing of beauty, not menace. The last one I saw was on the letterhead of Swift International, the firm of spooks and gumshoes that lies at the heart of this story. I was never cut out to get involved with people like that. As my wife Vanessa once said to me, it was my '24-carat honesty' that attracted her. I've always tried to be honest, with myself and with others. As a child I watched dishonest men cause my mother so much heartache; and the kind of women I like are those who can see through a poser at the first smile – women who aren't taken in by guys trying to impress them, who prefer men to be real, to be themselves. Take my friend Maya. She always said that no matter how high she flew, she wanted her real friends, like me, to 'tell it to me straight'.

Maya. Maya is even more central to the story than the spooks. She's the reason I'm here, in this beautiful place thousands of miles from home, writing these words, trying to remember, trying to figure it all out.

PART ONE

Chapter One

It was typical Vanessa to get up at half six on Monday morning to do the test. We'd discussed doing it at the weekend but she'd been reluctant. She hadn't wanted to get a result in case it wasn't what she wanted to hear and put her in the wrong mood for the party. It was her dad's sixtieth, and there was to be a big family do on Sunday. But by Monday morning she'd caved, and got up in the dark, before the central heating went on, because the instructions said 'first thing'. All the time I've known her, Vanessa has been mega-organised, someone who plans everything meticulously. She's also a morning person, whereas I'm not great at waking up. Somehow I've never rid myself of a childhood addiction to the warmth of a bed well slept in.

'Steve,' she shouted from the bathroom. 'Steve, wake up.'

I clung to the woozy semi-consciousness that comes as the eyelids are pricked open, and the mind has a moment to decide whether to abandon its interrupted dream and face the day, or return to sleep. But there must have been urgency in her voice, an excitement in the way she called my name that got through to me how important this was.

'Steve, it's positive. The test's positive.'

I sat up quickly, all remnants of the dream gone, and she

was standing there, her hair an unruly mess of red curls, no make-up, wearing a bra and knickers and waving the pregnancy test in her hand. She gave me a few seconds to take in what she was saying, then ran towards me and jumped on to the bed. I realised she was moments away from crying. She'd been talking about wanting a baby from the day we were married, and now, after six years of trying, the longed-for moment seemed to have come. I wasn't sure how to react. Could we trust this test? After all, it only came from the chemist, not a doctor. But I didn't want to dampen Vanessa's joy by questioning it. I said something suffocatingly trite about how our lives were going to change for ever, and I'd always be there for her and the baby, but it didn't seem enough. Suddenly what had been an abstract idea was becoming startlingly, achingly real. I might actually be months away from being a father. And I realised I didn't know how to feel about it. I found myself stroking her flat stomach and thinking that beneath the lightly freckled skin lay the beginnings of another human being. It would depend on me for everything, look to me for guidance in how to live; it would have colds, flu, broken bones; it would cry a lot, laugh a lot, might be good at maths and hopeless at history, or great at both; it would have a name, friends not yet born, kids of its own; and I thought 'Why am I thinking all this, why can't I just be like Vanessa and enjoy the moment?'

We spent the next half-hour discussing when to see the doctor for official confirmation, and who to tell if we got it (my mum not yet, her mum and dad probably, her sister Judith definitely since she was a nurse at St Mary's Hospital in Paddington, friends play it by ear but in general only after the third month). By now we were running late. Working for a

bank in the City, Vanessa needed at least an hour to get across town by Tube. Although my drive to Globus Logistics was theoretically quicker – I worked for a logistics company based in a twelve-storey, dark-glass office block close to the southern perimeter of Heathrow airport – the traffic at that time of the morning could be dire. We washed and dressed quickly, Vanessa now talking ever more excitedly as she rifled through her cupboard for a clean shirt and tights. I found it hard to keep up.

Vanessa is one of those women whose body is made for a business suit. She's almost as tall as I am, thin-waisted and long-limbed; she suits high heels, and her rich-red hair looks good against dark colours. Today, however, I noticed her collar was awry and she'd smudged her mascara. I tried to straighten her out as we said goodbye in the kitchen.

'Now listen to me,' I said, 'you're going to be fine, and you're going to be a great mum. I know it.' I kissed her on her forehead, then on the lips, and gave her a big hug, but I felt like I was play-acting. I knew I should have been feeling happy, and confident. But I didn't, at least not like I guessed you were *supposed* to when you'd just been given the news I'd been given.

'Thanks, darling,' she said, rushing now before heading off towards the Tube, 'and you're going to be a great dad too.' Trying not to think too much about what she'd just said, I locked up the house, threw my briefcase into the car, scraped the ice off the windscreen, and drove as fast as I could through the streets of Hammersmith, only remembering when I got to the Hogarth roundabout, and my head started to feel the nagging ache of caffeine starvation, that I'd had two cups of coffee rather than my usual three.

If there's one thing that stresses me out even more than being late, it's not having enough coffee before starting work. Three cups in the morning, and I'm human. Anything less, don't come near me. I guess I inherited the addiction from my mum who got through cups of tea the way some of her foul-smelling boyfriends got through cigarettes. Anyway, I was thinking I was going to have to make do with the dross that got served in the Globus canteen when I remembered there was a decent enough Coffee Nation machine at the last garage before the A4 becomes the M4.

I kept thinking about the *supposed* word as I tailed a filthy, dark blue Ford Galaxy, a claret and blue sticker in the back window urging me to 'Follow the Hammers' alongside a larger motif which said that Jesus Loved Me. Presumably Jesus told the driver what he was supposed to feel at various junctures in his life. But what if you didn't believe in Jesus? Who set the *supposed* rules then? Was there some secret Supposed Society that decreed that a man, on hearing the news he was to be a father, must feel happy, exhilarated; must communicate this to his wife, and to all others subsequently in a way that allowed them to follow the Supposed Society's strictures on how to hear the news of another's impending fatherhood, namely happiness and exhilaration but in a lower gear to that felt by the parents-to-be? Annoyingly, there was no separate till for Coffee Nation customers at the garage so I had to stand in line with half a dozen people paying for petrol. The scruffy woman in front of me was clearly even more late for work than I was, and getting agitated at how slowly the queue was moving, held up now by a man who wanted to pay for his fuel with a credit card, but then pay cash for a bottle of water. The woman tutted, but I decided to stay calm. Instead of

watching, impatiently, for the tiniest forward shuffle of the feet in front of me, I focussed my mind on the tinny radio tuned to Five Live. A reporter was relaying the details of another soldier's death in Afghanistan and I was tuning out of her analysis of how 'public opinion' would react, when she was suddenly interrupted by the presenter breaking news.

'And we must cut you off there, Charlotte,' said her male colleague, 'because we're getting reports, extraordinary allegations, that actress Maya Lowe is to be interviewed by police over claims that she assaulted a 42-year-old man.'

Maya? I almost dropped my coffee. What were they saying? I strained to hear, suddenly irritated by noises hitherto unnoticed – the pinging of barcodes swiped against tills; coffee machines belching; doors opening and closing.

'Yes, reports coming in to us here at Five Live say the 30-year-old film star has been accused of punching a man on board a flight from the West Indies, where she had been doing a photo shoot for an advertising campaign. It seems the man made a formal complaint to staff on the plane, and has now asked the police to investigate. Our crime correspondent Lewis Carlisle has been finding out more. Lewis, sensational allegations against a woman with the near perfect image.'

I had the exact change, and once I'd handed it over, irritated by the cashier's insistence that she give me a receipt, I hurried to the magazine rack to be closer to the radio speaker. Maya's face was on several of the covers propped up on the overcrowded shelves. 'Maya's magic moments' said one. 'My love for Dan, by Maya' said another. I looked away and concentrated on the source of the noise.

'Martin, yes, that's absolutely right. Maya Lowe, the world-famous actress with the girl-next-door image, star of a

succession of box-office smashes, now faces the prospect of being interrogated by police over claims of assault. The details are sketchy but what we do know, Martin, is this – she flew last night on flight BA2262 from Kingston Jamaica to London Gatwick airport. We know there was an altercation of some sort, and we know a complaint was made, and now the police are being asked to investigate. So as you say, Martin, this would seem to be more supermodel Naomi Campbell’s territory, not a situation we expect Maya Lowe to be in, a woman who recently displaced David Beckham no less in a survey of celebrities people would most like to have as a guest for the weekend.’

I was suddenly conscious of my heart beating faster than it should. Maya, my oldest friend, was in trouble. I think it was the first time I’d ever heard the radio report something negative about her. Putting my coffee down on the floor, I fished out my mobile and punched in a text: ‘Maya! What’s going on? Are you OK? Call if you can. Steve X’.

I ran to the car. I should have walked. A dollop of cappuccino froth spurted out of the drinking hole of my coffee cup, and spilled on to my knuckles, causing me to wince. Still I ran. I couldn’t bear the idea of missing something. But I needn’t have worried. This story was going to dominate the news for most of the day. By the time I’d got the radio tuned to Five Live, and manoeuvred my company Peugeot back into the traffic, the presenter was close to the breathless hyperventilation that accompanies ‘breaking news’, especially when a ‘celebrity’ is involved.

‘So, for those of you who are just back from taking the kids to school’ – I hated the chummy assumptions presenters made about what their listeners were doing, what sort of people they were – ‘or getting into the car to head for work, and

hearing this sensational breaking news here on Five Live for the first time, here's a recap: Maya Lowe, Britain's hottest film star, is to face a police investigation over claims of assault on a transatlantic flight. I'm joined on the phone by Alan Walsh, freelance film critic. Alan, thanks for joining me on *Five Live Breakfast*, what do you make of what you've heard and, perhaps more significantly, what will this mean for Maya's career?'

Over the years I'd heard a lot of Alan Walsh's critiques of Maya's films. He never gave her a bad review. Today, though, he sounded more guarded.

'Well a lot obviously will depend on what actually happened but if the police have been called in, that sounds kind of serious. If she is formally charged with assault or some kind of violence-type situation, then it's hard to see how this can be helpful to her career and her image.'

'Alan, as we were saying earlier, Maya Lowe's profile has been about as flawless as any image-maker could hope for – successful, happily married, does so much for charity, rarely attracting the wrong sort of headlines – so how will she be coping with this?'

'Yes, Martin, she has been in many ways a classic textbook success story in image terms . . .'

Sheldon, I muttered. Where the hell was Sheldon in all this? What was she fucking paying him for?

As if in answer to my question, the presenter again cut in. 'Alan, just wait there, sorry to interrupt, but I'm being told now we will be hearing, shortly, from Nick Sheldon, Maya Lowe's agent, a big name of course in show-business circles, who has called a briefing at his offices, so hopefully that will clear up a few things for us.'

I was on to the motorway now, and the traffic was flowing

more freely, as drivers released their pent-up frustration and made the most of the four or five miles before their satnav machines beeped out the warning of live cameras roadside. I was hoping to be able to get to the office, where there was a TV in reception, to see Sheldon's performance. Sky were bound to show it live.

I was passing Heston Services when Maya called. Her voice was choked.

'Steve, I'm really glad you texted. I didn't want to bother you so early, but I've been wanting to talk to you. I feel as if the world's going mental around me.'

'What the hell is going on?'

'What have you heard?' She sounded more stressed out than I'd ever known her – even worse than when she was breaking up with Mike.

'Well there's this guy on Five Live saying you hit someone . . .'

'Crazy stuff.'

'What – not true?'

'Well, depends how you're looking at it.'

'Meaning . . . ?'

'Are you driving?' she asked.

'Hands-free, don't worry.' It wasn't true, and I could sense the disapproval of the silver-haired lunatic driving too close behind me in his red BMW, who had been flashing his lights to get me to move into the middle lane, but I was anxious to hear what had happened. 'Come on, give me the story. Who was with you on the plane?'

'Some kid Nick sent from his office . . . Only been there a month. Doesn't know shit . . .'

'So . . . ?'

‘So, I’m having dinner, trying to sleep but I never sleep properly on planes, so I watch a movie, get up to go to the loo and as I come out there’s this guy, in those stupid BA pyjamas, and he positions himself so I can’t just slip by; then, you know, he loves my work, and he’s just this minute been watching *Fast Track to Safety* and how weird it was to be watching while the star was three rows in front, and what am I up to, so we do a bit of small talk and I’m thinking, well it’ll pass the time, but I don’t know, he must have misread the signals because he has his hand on my arm at one point and it’s like not accidental, it was a move, no doubt about it, so I say “Anyway, I must go back to my seat,” and he says “That’s such a shame Maya, I am so enjoying talking to you and getting to know you,” and he’s standing there, like making it hard for me to walk by and I’m feeling bad vibes, so I start to insist, and he gets really agitated.’

‘Where was everyone else? Nick’s guy?’

‘Asleep, eating, how do I know? We were like through the curtain at the front of the plane, just behind the cockpit. It was fairly dark, dimmed lights and all that. And then as I push past, he sort of puts his hand on my back, pretending to make way for me, but actually trying to touch my body with his. He’s got his leg against my thigh, and his upper arm brushing my tits, so I kind of pushed him, and he rocked back a bit but then fell towards me, arm on tits again, so I pushed him again and then he falls against the wall. And that was it. End of story. I go back to my seat. Next thing I know, the chief steward comes and says someone has made a complaint. I mean it is too fucking ridiculous for words.’

I had kept Five Live on in the background, and the presenter was getting more excited, announcing that Nick Sheldon was

about to speak. He coated the name 'Nick Sheldon' with a layer of gravity normally reserved for presidents and prime ministers in times of international crisis. 'Your agent is about to make a statement,' I said. 'Do you want to hear?'

'Not really.'

'Where are you?'

'Home. I got back about an hour ago. Vultures gathering outside.'

'How many?'

'A couple of dozen. They're still coming though. It'll be the full works by the evening. Grumpy neighbours time.'

'Where's Dan?'

'Had to go to work early for a meeting.'

I was close to the office, almost at the car park, as Nick began.

'Come on,' I said, 'you should listen to this.' I turned up the volume as Sheldon started to speak.

'Thank you for coming, ladies and gentlemen. I have a short statement and then I will take your questions.' Maya's agent was in his fifties, tanned and jowly, with a deep, reassuring voice, carrying the tiniest hint of a West Country burr.

'My client Maya Lowe flew from Kingston Jamaica to London Gatwick overnight last night, arriving in the early hours of this morning. She had been working on a photo shoot. She was accompanied by a representative of my office, who has sworn an affidavit which along with Maya's own account confirms the accuracy of what I am about to tell you and, through you, the public. Maya was travelling first class, in seat 1A. My colleague was in 1B, seated alongside her. During the flight, she made a visit to the washroom. When she came out of the washroom, a fellow passenger, Mr Vivian Gibbs, of West

Indian origin, was waiting for her. He engaged Maya in conversation, then made some highly inappropriate remarks and finally made a pass at her. Despite Maya making clear her desire to return to her seat, Mr Gibbs persisted in his attempts to force himself upon her. After politely asking him to desist on several occasions, she finally pushed past him and returned to her seat. She was shocked and upset, as she reported to my colleague.'

'Are you hearing this OK?' I asked Maya, as I pulled into my parking space.

'Yeah, yeah, shush,' she said.

'My colleague thought Maya had a case for sexual assault because of the nature of the pass made at her. Maya felt that to make a complaint would simply add to an ordeal she wanted to forget. My colleague did, however, ask one of the cabin crew to keep an eye on Mr Gibbs, who was in seat 4c. It therefore came as a total shock to her subsequently, about forty minutes later, to be told by the cabin crew that Mr Gibbs, in defiance of the facts, had himself made a complaint. My colleague sought to speak to Mr Gibbs, who refused all contact and said simply that he intended to ask the police to investigate on landing. We understand he has now done so and as you know, this has been briefed to the media, presumably by Mr Gibbs' associates, since I am confident the police would not be so unprofessional as to do so.

'Let me be clear – as a British citizen, Maya Lowe will of course happily co-operate with any investigation. But this is a complete waste of police time and money. Let me also say this – I understand that Mr Gibbs has already made contact with a newspaper group with a view to selling his story. And there I think we go to the heart of the matter. Maya Lowe is

a very famous, very beautiful, very successful actress, of infinite interest to many media organisations. And when he noticed her seated a few rows in front of him, Mr Gibbs saw his chance. I think it is important that the British media resists the efforts to make money on the back of these false claims. And I hope the police will see this for what it is – an attempt to use them to help extort money from a newspaper. Thank you.'

'Wow,' I said. 'Strong stuff.'

'He's bloody good is Nick,' said Maya. 'He told me he was confident he could turn it against the guy.'

'Everything he said true?'

'Give or take a bit in the margins, yeah.'

Nick Sheldon was now facing a barrage of questions from reporters.

'What do you mean by "inappropriate remarks" Nick?' one shouted.

'I have nothing to add on that. The kind of thing men like him may find funny, but any decent person finds offensive, and women find frightening.'

'Nick, can you give us any more idea of what you call the pass he made at her?'

'No, Maya does not wish for me to go into detail on this.'

'Did she at any time feel in danger of being raped, Mr Sheldon?' asked another voice, female.

'Well, at some point the air stewards would have come by, but it was not a nice experience.'

'Might she sue?'

'Maya has many great qualities. Vindictiveness is not one of them. I think you all know enough about her to know that.'

'Where is she now, Nick?'

‘Back in London.’

‘Will she be commenting?’

‘She is double-parked in a no-comment slot. Sorry.’ I could hear some of the reporters laughing. With, not at him.

‘Do you think the airlines should have special security for A-list celebrities to stop this kind of thing happening?’ one asked.

‘We have no complaint against the airline.’

‘. . . because they give us lots of free flights and upgrades,’ Maya chipped in.

Martin, the presenter, was back on in breathless mode.

‘Well, quite sensational stuff there and Maya Lowe’s agent proving the old adage that there are always two sides to the story. And it seems her side is that she was effectively sexually harassed. He is saying, if I can paraphrase, that the man on the plane targeted her with a view to provoking her so that he could say she hit him, and then use the police to give the story some kind of legitimacy in order to try and get money from the papers. Well listening to that with me was the showbiz editor of the *Sun*, Matthew Kay. Matthew, thanks for joining us and you heard there Maya Lowe’s agent challenging you not to buy this story, what do you say to that?’

‘I thought he gave a very strong performance there and frankly if it comes to Maya’s word against the word of some random West Indian guy on a plane, I know who our readers would believe. Now I am not aware Gibbs or anyone on his behalf has been in touch, so I don’t know which newspaper he was talking about, but I would be very surprised if we were interested in buying his story.’

‘Mission accomplished,’ said Maya. ‘I think you can turn it off.’

‘OK. Actually I’d better go. I’m at the office now, and I’m already late. But, listen, are you OK? You seem really down.’

‘Well, to tell the truth Steve, things aren’t so good at the moment.’

It was strange to hear Maya sounding so subdued. For the past year and a half, certainly since she’d married Dan, it was like she’d been on a perpetual high, always chirpy when she called me, full of enthusiasm for new projects she was involved in.

‘Want to talk about it?’ I asked. ‘We could have one of our lunches. It’s been ages since we saw each other properly . . .’

I was expecting some excuse about why she couldn’t make it. She’d been doing that a lot recently. There was a time when we had lunch regularly, at least once a month, sometimes more often, but her marriage to Dan had changed all that. To my surprise, though, she was enthusiastic.

‘God, Steve, you know that would be great! How are you fixed tomorrow? Short notice but I could really do with getting a few things off my chest.’

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Usual system?’

She laughed. ‘Usual system. I’ll see you in the Rectangle.’

It was only when she’d hung up that I remembered I had agreed to go with Vanessa to the doctor’s tomorrow, provided she could get an appointment. What if I had to cancel Maya? Vanessa hadn’t wanted me to tell her about the baby, so I’d have to make up some white lie. It would seem flakey. Also I always made it a priority to be there for Maya. She lived such a mad, high-speed life, she needed someone like me to rely on. I found myself praying that Dr Blake would be fully booked, and then realised the stupidity, or was it cruelty, of putting lunch with Maya before getting confirmation from a doctor that Vanessa definitely was pregnant.

Suddenly the emotion of the morning caught up with me, and I laid my head on the steering wheel for a moment, closed my eyes. Vanessa expecting. Maya in trouble. It was a lot to cope with on a grey, February Monday morning.

A couple of minutes later my phone rang and I jumped, tweaking a muscle in my neck in the process.

It was Jerry, my colleague, kind of friend.

'I'm standing at the window, Steve, and I can see your Peugeot in the car park, so I'm assuming you're here. Better get to your desk fast. Brandon's in one of his warpath moods.'

I didn't know whether I was pissed off at the interruption, or relieved at the distraction. Maya's world constantly intrigued me, but I was glad I lived in the real one, even if it was inhabited by a slave-driver like Mike Brandon.