

YOU CAN'T RUN

THE TERRIFYING TRUE STORY
OF A YOUNG WOMAN TRAPPED
IN A VIOLENT RELATIONSHIP

MANDY THOMAS

with KATE MOORE



EBURY
PRESS

PART ONE

FALLING
UNDER
A SPELL

*How sad
You feel to steal
My summer's tune
And turn it
Into winter's gloom.*

Chapter One

It was 1984 when my life changed forever. May 1984. Duran Duran were at the top of the charts – and I was on top of the world. I was eighteen years old, living with two girlfriends in a shared house; a house where all our mates used to come to chill out, to watch movies or simply hang with a coffee and a nice slice of conversation. That day – that fateful day – the girls and I had headed from our hometown of Rugby to the big city: to Birmingham and its famous Bullring Shopping Centre. I'd been there the week before for the very first time, shopping with my mum for her birthday, and when I'd raved to my housemates about how amazing the shops were, we planned a girls' day out, just the three of us.

I was a short, skinny teenager then: a bubbly girl with distinctive bright red hair – and an even more distinctive quiff fringe, which I used to flick out of my eyes when I was dancing to Simon Le Bon in the nightclubs; dancing till my feet ached. I loved to dance – and to paint and to draw and to write. Music was in my soul – I sang everywhere. I loved anything that expressed myself.

I'd discovered writing when I was nine years old, after my father had died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of just thirty-eight. The only way I could express my crushing grief was through words. My English teacher, Mrs Mickleborough, told me I was a born writer; she said I'd moved her to tears with a

FALLING UNDER A SPELL

poem I'd written about my father when I was ten. After that, she entered me into competitions for my poetry – competitions I won. I have continued to write poetry throughout my life, and I've included some of my poems in this book because they help to express what I was feeling, even in the darkest times. I also excelled in art. I drew all the time, anything from Beatrix Potter books for an old lady I knew to cartoons and my own artworks. The colours seeped into my dreams, and I hoped to make a career of it one day. Just one of my dreams.

Life at home was hard after my dad passed away. I won't go into it here, but let's just say I moved out as soon as I could, not long after my sixteenth birthday in November 1981, into a little bedsit. I worked like a demon to support myself. Even at home after school, when I was fifteen/sixteen, I was a waitress at a local hotel. Then when I left school, I worked in a newsagents/grocers, went on to selling windows and worked for an American health company. I then started in a bar in a working men's club, collecting glasses and doing other odd jobs as I was sixteen. At seventeen, I helped a woman run exercise classes; a good job for me, as I'd done gymnastics as a child and got into formation street-dancing as a teenager. It was another way of letting out any pain I had inside. You can't feel down, not when your feet are pounding in time to your own heartbeat, and your limbs are wild and free. I may have been on my own, but I was surviving. I was doing OK. I was doing the odd painted portrait for people too, putting my beloved art skills to good use.

Fashion was another one of my loves – especially clothes in bright colours, like those I swirled in my paint palettes – so this day at the Bullring was a real treat. The girls and I had only been

living together for a few months at that time, and we really felt like a team as we browsed through the outfits on display, giggling over some of the more outlandish gear and oohing over other items. I had a sweet, kind boyfriend back then, a six-foot-four basketball player who also body-popped, and my brain was ticking over thoughts of what I might wear on our next night out clubbing together. I was fretting about our friendship a bit; I kept telling him he was too nice for me, that he deserved someone who wasn't quite so fragile inside, but he wouldn't listen. He was so nice he couldn't even see the damage in my heart.

It was on our second loop round the shops when it happened. We'd been shopping for a few hours by then, exploring most of the stores in the Bullring, so we were all flagging. We decided to sit and have a rest and a cuppa. It was a hot day and we were done in.

There was a café on the ground floor in an open area not far from where we were, so we headed for that. I strode across the mall towards the escalator in my sensible grey court shoes, my heels scoring a soundtrack to a scene I will never ever forget.

I was about to step onto the escalator when I felt that gentle tap on my shoulder. I heard his voice for the very first time, from behind me. It was slow and polite. Smooth and velvety. Charming, you might call it. I could hear a smile in it, infusing the words he said.

'Have you got the time?'

I turned around. A man about my age stood before me, dressed in jeans and a red sweatshirt. He was around my height, five foot three, with a head full of curly hair and a beaming smile that displayed a fine set of white teeth. His eyes gleamed a light brown, like his skin. They seemed to drink me in as my gaze

flickered over him. There was a breathless pause, and then he smiled again.

And in that moment, everything changed.

It was as if he'd cast a spell. To this day I say that. As though he'd magically waved a wand and made my whole world stop stock-still. It wasn't sexual chemistry, nor the romance of falling in love – it was a powerful, hypnotic incantation. An enchantment, if you will.

Or a curse.

Not realising his request was a classic pick-up line, I dragged my eyes away from his to check the numbers on my watch. I didn't normally wear a timepiece, but something had impelled me to slip it on that morning. I was dressed very conservatively for me, in a white blouse and a grey skirt, and perhaps I had thought it suited my outfit.

Thinking about it now, I must have looked like a schoolgirl that day. Innocent. Sweet. Corruptible.

We chatted all the way down the escalator. My friends and I went to get a drink from the café, just like we'd planned, and he followed. For some reason, it seemed OK. He was asking us questions in that charming voice of his, finding out where we were from and simple stuff like that. The feeling was really weird, like everything was glazed. Still under this haze of magic, I chatted away, quite happily. Before I knew it, my friends had wandered off, back to the shops, and it was just me and him sitting in the café talking. But it was a busy public place, right in the middle of the mall, and I thought, *I'll be all right.*

I don't remember what we talked about. I have no idea. Knowing me, it was a load of twaddle because I always ramble.

All I remember is the escalator and then me falling under a spell; and me thinking he was very charming, with his white teeth and his big smile. He mentioned that he went to the gym. I remember thinking that with the gym and those fine white teeth he must look after himself well. Something inside me – and perhaps it started that same afternoon – wanted him to look after me, too.

No one ever really had.

My friends came back, eventually, and we all got the train to Rugby, back to our shared house. There was a whole group of people who came with us because my housemates were social girls, just like me, and they'd made some new friends and invited them back. But amidst all the chatter, he and I sat talking, just the two of us alone. We chatted all the way back on the train like I'd known him all my life. And that's what made me think, *This person's the person.*

He stayed the night. Nothing happened, not in that way, but in some ways everything happened because my life as I knew it was never the same after that. The next day, I broke up with my boyfriend, with this soft teddy bear of a boy, and I broke his heart. Seeing the hurt in those bright, kind eyes of his, I did think to myself, *What on earth am I doing?* But the spell I was under was a strong one, and it said: *Just do it anyway.*

The man from the mall soon came back. It might have been the next day or a few days afterwards, I can't remember now, but he pretty much moved himself in, to my delight, and we continued our long, deep conversations. I told him everything about myself: the good, the bad, the painful ... the shameful. Every last detail of everything about my life and my history; all

FALLING UNDER A SPELL

my hopes; all my fears. I'd never met anyone before who made me feel like I could let go and show my true self, but he did.

He told me his name – Dusty – but the rest of his world was closed off. I didn't realise that at the time. It was only afterwards, long afterwards, that I realised I'd told him everything, but he'd told me nothing. I'd ask him questions and he would change the subject or give me a brief, nothing kind of answer. He'd say he didn't want to talk about it. He'd say he was way more interested in what *I* thought and what *I* dreamed, and why didn't I tell him another little secret? I was overwhelmed by his interest, thinking, *This person really cares about me.* (How wrong I was. How *stupid* I was.)

But it was breezy, in the beginning. He made me laugh. I actually looked on him as my knight in shining armour who was going to whisk me away to a bright new future. He bought me chocolates and flowers; I'd never had that before. It made me feel special and wanted. And it was even more special because he knew everything about me – all my hurts and sorrows that had maimed me deep inside – and yet he still wanted me.

(Later, I found out that my damage had attracted him, right from the start, from that day in the mall. Watching the hurt little 'schoolgirl' cross the mall, he'd bet his friend he could 'get' me. Oh, he won that bet. Big time.)

Before too long, he came to meet my gran, the most special person in my life. He was polite and charming, just as he had been on the day I met him: pleasant and nice. I met his parents, too, though it wasn't an arranged visit. It turned out that they'd wondered where he was, as he was always stopping at mine and he hadn't told them where he was going to. He had,

however, scrawled my address on a mirror in his bedroom back in Birmingham, and eventually his folks came to check he was OK at this mystery location, as it had been so long since they'd heard from him. I found all that a bit odd, but when I asked him about it, he said, 'It's none of your business.'

What *was* his business, however, was me. Oh, I was his primary concern. And his interest was always so caring, of course. I felt almost touched by it, this man looking out for me. I'd mention some party I was planning to go to, or a new nightclub I wanted to check out, and he'd say, with seemingly genuine concern, 'What do you want to go there for?' In time, he might suggest that one of my pals, from my very wide circle of friends, perhaps wasn't looking out for my best interests, or he might say lightly that he didn't know what I saw in them. Naturally, we'd end up not really seeing that person anymore. He might turn up at the house unexpectedly, and I'd get in 'late' because I didn't know he was coming, and he'd say, 'Where have you been?', like I was in the wrong. Then I'd tell him where I'd been and he'd get so angry. *That's a bit weird*, I thought, but I didn't see it as any kind of warning sign. I was blind and deaf to everything but him.

In the end, I found it was easier to stay in, not to go out, to avoid my friends, not to speak to anyone he didn't like. It seemed to make him happy, they seemed mild requests, and I trusted him. So I thought, *Well, I want to be with him and I want to make him happy, so I best just do as I'm told, for the overall good*. I thought he was doing all of it with good intentions, after all, so there didn't seem to be any harm in wanting to please him.

My housemates tried to talk to me about him. Only a couple of weeks into our relationship, they pulled me aside.

FALLING UNDER A SPELL

‘Mandy,’ one of them said, struggling to find the words, ‘we’re not sure about him. There’s something about him we don’t like.’

Fool that I was, I thought, *They’re just jealous.*

They didn’t have boyfriends at the time, and I thought they didn’t want me to have one, either. I didn’t see what they saw.

Maybe I didn’t want to.

As I stopped going out, my friends got more upset. We had been a team – three girls out on the town – but I wasn’t part of the team anymore. Nonetheless, they didn’t say anything to me again. What more could they say? They’d already told me they didn’t like him and I’d just carried on seeing him. I was a lost cause.

One night, a few months into our relationship, I was ‘late’ home again. My housemate and I had nipped to the shops but the shop we’d planned to go to was shut, so we had to go to one further away, and then a friend offered us a lift back in his car, but he had to make a detour first before he took us home ... Anyway, long story short, when I walked back into our crowded house, which was jammed as usual with our gang of pals hanging out, Dusty wasn’t best pleased.

To say the least.

He led me up to my room and started asking me questions. *Where had I been? What had I been doing? Why did it take me so long?* And that velvety voice of his began to rise in volume until he was screaming at me. I was trying to explain, to stutter out about the shop and the lift and everything, but he just didn’t want to know.

His questions got more and more heated.

I couldn’t get a word in edgeways.

And then, with no warning, his hand shot out and he slapped me across the face.

That shut me up.

I stopped talking and lifted my hand to my cheek. It wasn't a really hard slap. But it was the first time he had hit me, and that made my skin sting more than the actual power of his strike.

I didn't say anything at all at first. I was too shocked to speak. But then I found my voice. I started shouting back at him, shouting that he'd slapped me, and he roared at me that he was leaving and he wasn't coming back. He took off into the night and I wandered slowly down the stairs, back into the warm mass of friends in the living room below.

I told my housemate what had happened. She hugged me. She said again that she thought he was a bad egg. And I spent the evening in the company of my friends, my head buzzing with confused feelings, even after the red mark of his flattened palm had faded from my skin.

He returned the next day, bearing chocolates and brightly coloured roses. He smiled sheepishly at me, and he said one word.

'Sorry.'

I stared at him, at all his bright white teeth curved into a toothy grin, trying his best to make me smile, and I felt the tug of that mysterious spell again. Something in my mind was telling me to make it work. He was the one.

I was young, and I was foolish, and I was blind and deaf and dumb.

That was the only 'sorry' he ever said.