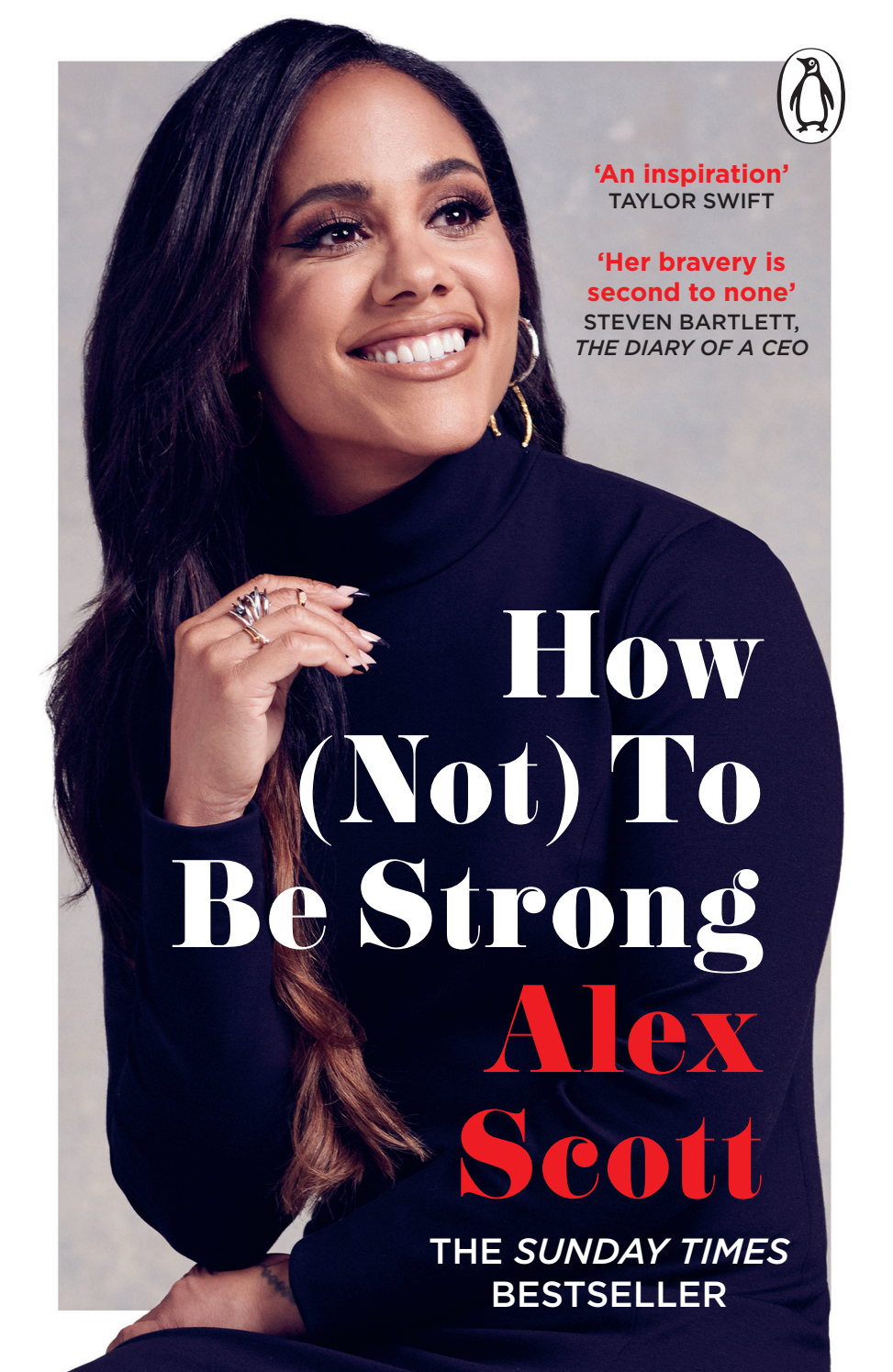

'An inspiration'
TAYLOR SWIFT
'Her bravery is second to none'
STEVEN BARTLETT,
THE DIARY OF A CEO
How (Not) To Be Strong
Alex Scott
THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

How (Not) To Be Strong

'An inspiration' Taylor Swift

'I was incredibly moved by Alex's story and her bravery is second to none' Stephen Bartlett, entrepreneur and host of *The Diary of a CEO*

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'A searingly honest read, this book is an inspiring tale of succeeding against the odds' *FourFourTwo Magazine*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Scott MBE is an award-winning broadcaster and former professional footballer. She helped Arsenal in their historic 'quadruple' season, in which they won all of their trophy competitions, and was later appointed as the team's captain. She represented England in 140 appearances with the Lionesses, retiring as the second most-capped England player across the men's and women's game.

Alex is one of the UK's most in-demand presenters, appearing on *The One Show, Children in Need, Sport Relief* and ITV's *The Games*. In 2021, she made history as the first permanent female host of BBC's Football Focus. She is an ambassador for the BBC's mental health platform, Headspace, and holds honorary doctorates from the University of East London and University of Hertfordshire.

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How (Not) To Be Strong

Alex Scott



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It might not always feel like it, but you've got this!

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As difficult as it may be, we have to reach a point where we let go of the burdens of our experiences and share the beauty of the lessons they left behind.

Morgan Richard Olivier

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Contents

Introduction 1

1 Strength Is . . . Knowing Where You Come From 5
2 Strength Is . . . Finding Your Voice 21
3 Strength Is . . . Defying Expectations 37
4 Strength Is . . . Choosing To Break Away 60
5 Strength Is . . . Taking Chances 72
6 Strength Is . . . Keeping Your Eye On The Ball 82
7 Strength Is . . . Learning To Love 111
8 Strength Is . . . Listening To Your Gut 136
9 Strength Is . . . Knowing When To Take The Next Step 169
10 Strength Is . . . Celebrating Wins 193
11 Strength Is . . . Asking For Help 203
12 Strength Is . . . Learning To Let Guilt Go 223

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13 Strength Is . . . Showing Your Softness 231
14 Strength Is . . . My Mum 249
15 Strength Is . . . Having The Courage To Follow Your Dream 256

Conclusion 262
Acknowledgements 267
Achievements 275

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Introduction

Today, I am smiling. I think it's the first day in months when I've woken up and my brain is filled with colour, memories, moments, trains of thought. I can feel growth within myself once again. As I'm writing this, my head is clear. I feel like I'm back.

I don't know where the start, middle or end of this book is. What I do know is this: like most things in my life, how I go about writing it will probably not be in the way we are 'supposed' to do things. But I will 'trust the process', as they say. People have been asking me to write a book since I retired from football in 2018. I had meetings and spoke to people about the idea. Did I need the money? Hell, yes I did. But deep in my gut, it didn't feel right. As tempting as the offers were, my instinct was stronger. I just had a sense – one that has always seemed to be there for me during big life decisions – that there was more to that chapter of my story yet. I didn't have a clue what that could be, but I listened. Turns out, my instinct was correct. There was a lot more to come. And now the time is right.

I've been in a dark space for the last six months. What I have learned over the past couple of years is that I'm very good at disguising when I feel low, when my head

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is fogged. I've often wondered why this is, why I feel the need to always be strong. I feel very guilty about my sadness; from the outside looking in, what the heck do I have to be sad about? I've managed to have a successful career in two fields I am passionate about. But what's worse than feeling guilty about being sad is putting on a happy face, so that others think you're OK, especially when you can't articulate the emotions you're feeling in the first place; pretending to yourself that this is a form of strength. It messes with your head.

I feel as though I've saved up all my vulnerability and I'm letting it all out in this book. This is the real me. Don't get me wrong, I'm scared. But there's no going back now – and I'm also excited, at the thought of being free. I've carried such a lot of fear, of being judged, or of hurting other people if I speak my truth. And I hope that by showing you the lessons I've learned throughout my life – about what strength is and isn't – you might find some strength too.

Why is now the right time? Maybe because I'm learning how to be a little more selfish and to ask myself what *I* need first and foremost. And because there is a whole lot of stuff I need to get off my chest. If I continue not to speak about certain experiences that have shaped me and my beliefs, I feel like I'm being dishonest with you all – and myself.

My public persona is one of strength. I've managed to turn my pain into power. Some of you will have been on the journey with me all the way from the East End.

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Some will have joined during my football career. Or maybe you just know me as 'Alex from the telly'. My life has been a full one, in so many different ways. And I've reached a point where I'm ready to look back on what has happened so far, to start making sense of it all and drawing those threads together. And I'm also ready to redefine what it means to be 'strong', to let my walls down and open up. Get ready; it's time to flip my fear.

'Don't ever let fear hold you back' is one of my favourite sayings. Well, let's do this, then.

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1

Strength Is . . .
Knowing Where You Come From

The other day, my taxi driver started telling me stories, as people in that line of work like to do. He used to be a bus driver, he said, and at times would have to drive the 309 bus route. He hated the route, though, because it went through the Aberfeldy estate in Poplar, which has a reputation for being so rough that he didn't feel safe. What he didn't know was that Aberfeldy is my manor, and has been since my parents took me home from the hospital in October 1984. The driver had picked me up from Mayfair, a 'nice bit of town', and probably couldn't conceive of me ever having been near the area he was rubbishing. I didn't let on that I knew Aberfeldy, had spent my childhood there. I wanted to hear how others really viewed the little pocket of London where I grew up. 'Rough and not much life to it' is how the taxi driver described it.

It might be rough around the edges but there is a real sense of community in Aberfeldy; everyone knows each other and I've always felt safe. Around the estate, I was always 'Ronnie Scott's little sister' when I was growing

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up, which I didn't mind at all. It wasn't the prettiest place, with tower blocks situated in the centre of a busy triangle of main roads. On one side of the estate is the A12, always gridlocked during the morning and evening commutes. At the opposite end is the A13, filled with cars trying to escape the traffic of the Blackwall Tunnel or reach the motorway. Days were soundtracked by honking cars or the sirens of emergency services rushing somewhere.

I lived in a tall tower block with my mum, dad, brother Ronnie and about three hundred other people. We were at number 43 on the first floor, our door guarded by a black iron gate for extra protection, so no one could kick it in. The only play areas were a tiny patch of grass at the back of the tower block, or the waste land out front, situated by the gas works. It was ugly but it was my bedroom view. There were local shops and a school, but that was about it. Being able to get on with life and make the most of what you had was the way things were. That lifestyle gave me survival skills I carry with me to this day.

Growing up, my bedroom wall was plastered with posters of musicians that I would cut out from American music magazines. Everyone from Aaliyah to 2Pac was on that wall, but there were no sporting role models. My parents weren't massive sports fans, and we wouldn't sit down together and watch sport on the TV. I didn't have any dreams of being a footballer; I certainly didn't see any women footballers. The closest people I had to role models were the Williams sisters. From a

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young age, I think every Black child saw a reflection of themselves in the Williamses. They made mainstream news and transcended their sport from the very start because they didn't follow the same path as everyone else in their field; they did it their way and weren't afraid to show the world how and why. I read stories about how the sisters would train in caged tennis courts, with violence going on around them. They set an example and never relied on 'poor me' narratives; there was always pride in where they came from, and pride in the fact they'd trained so hard and made it. I think it allowed everyone in a similar situation to dream. I was proud of them. Every year I'd tune in to Wimbledon – I wasn't really a tennis fan at the time, but I wanted to watch *them* every year when they came to London. I would sit in front of the TV and dream that one day I'd go and see them play. 'If the Williamses can make it, no matter what, you can find a way to,' I used to tell myself. I imagined sitting in the green stalls of Centre Court, sipping on champagne and munching strawberries, just like I saw the rich white folk doing on my TV set.

Even though I don't live in Poplar anymore, it's still home. When I go to visit Mum and Ronnie, I love driving down the close and hearing neighbours like Catherine and Ann calling out my name to say hi, just like when I was a kid. I always look out for Rene down the street, to make sure she's OK and to give her a wave. Rene lived on the tenth floor of the tower block and would sit on her little balcony, shouting down to my brother and me

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on the patch of grass below with requests to go get cans of Irn-Bru for her from the local shop. We loved these missions because she'd always include an extra 20p for us to spend on pick 'n' mix. And Rene's daughter Avril served as our babysitter when Mum needed some help or would go on a night out. Then there's Sam, who works in the cafe I would stroll to every afternoon to get a tuna sandwich for lunch, and who still asks after me. Bee, in the off-licence. Mr Patel, who I remember rarely having conversations with, but come Eid every year, he'd always knock on our door bearing delicious food and a smile. These are the people who act as the anchors of my life, who ground me. It's my borough that made me who I am today.

My family has deep, deep roots in east London. I discovered this when doing *Who Do You Think You Are?*, the BBC's genealogy show, in 2021. I'd never asked many questions about my ancestors. Growing up, I was led to believe you don't ask questions; you wait until you're told. I went into *Who Do You Think You Are?* knowing very little, and everything they dig up on the show is presented to you for the first time on camera, so my surprised reactions were very real!

I discovered that we had Jewish roots on Mum's side, via my great-grandfather, Philip Gittleson, known as 'Philip G'. His parents had emigrated from Lithuania in the late 1900s to escape the pogroms. According to Mum, he was a total character – he'd even fought the fascists at the 1936 Battle of Cable Street. There's a mural

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in Wapping dedicated to the Cable Street skirmish that I used to walk past every time I visited Nanna Scott (my dad's mum), but until *Who Do You Think You Are?*, I didn't know anything about the event it represented. I'm proud that my family were fighting against hate even back then.

The historians uncovered other information that filled in some gaps. Philip G's brother Abraham – my grand-uncle – struggled with his mental health and ended up being sent to Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum in 1934, when he was forty-one years old. Abraham lived there for thirty years until he died. I was heartbroken when I heard that; to think of him there, alone. I remember sitting on a hard park bench as I was being told this, trying to process it, with a camera in my face and being asked, 'Can you articulate the emotion you are feeling, Alex?' Honestly? Not really. The show is such a whirlwind; you're given so much information and barely have any time to wrap your head around it before it's on to the next part of filming.

Since the programme aired, I've tried to sort out everything in my head. I guess I feel a deeper connection, to both that part of my family and to a Jewish heritage I didn't even know existed. There's a sense of pride too, because my family fought for freedom and diversity in east London and I was a direct product of that. But their lives were full of sadness as well. I felt that deeply. It reminded me of how far we've come in even beginning to discuss poor mental health. When I was growing up, there was a place in east London called

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St Clement's, and as kids we were told to stay away from it because it was inhabited by 'crazy people'. Infrastructure to support people with mental health issues may still not be as good as it could be in this country, especially if you haven't got money, but our understanding of the landscape has come on leaps and bounds in the last ten years alone.

Who Do You Think You Are? didn't just explore the history of my white ancestors. I finally went to Jamaica to learn more about the Scotts, my Nan's side of the family. It was my first time visiting the island – I'd always said I couldn't just go there on holiday; it's part of my history, and I wanted to know more about my family and who I was before I made the trip.

We filmed a few bits in London before heading off, which is when something interesting happened. See, in 2018, the actor Catherine Tyldesley, from *Coronation Street*, had arranged for me to see a psychic while we were touring with *Strictly Come Dancing*. We met in the Lowry Hotel, Salford, and I'll never forget what she told me that Friday morning. She said I would travel to Jamaica to find out more about my family, but also that Nan – who'd recently passed – had left me a ring which I hadn't been given. I hadn't known Nan had left me anything in her will. Don't worry though, the psychic assured me, because Nan was 'going to find a way to make sure I get it'. Three years later, I was filming the last of my UK segments for *Who Do You Think You Are?*, with my flight for Jamaica scheduled the next day. My cousin Marie had

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been showing me Nan and Grandad's Jamaican birth certificates, but as soon as we were done filming, she asked if she could have a minute to speak with me. I didn't really have time; I had to rush off as it was a photoshoot day, I was running late to film Soccer Aid, and my brain was fried with the immense amount of information I was already trying to process about the Jewish side of my family. But I could tell there was something Marie really wanted to tell me off camera, so we went outside.

'I'm so sorry, Alex,' she said earnestly. 'I've got something that belongs to you. I've had it for a couple of years but I just can't keep it anymore. It's not meant for me, it's yours.'

As Marie put her hand in her pocket, I burst out crying.

She stopped and looked at me. 'Why are you crying?' she said.

'Is it a ring?' I asked, through tears.

She squinted at me, confused, but replied: 'Yes.'

By now, I was sobbing uncontrollably. It had happened just like the psychic said it would. The ring was Nan's wedding band, Marie told me. I threaded it on a thin chain and wore it for the rest of filming – if you watch the show back, in Jamaica, there I am, wearing Nan's ring around my neck. She was on the journey with me the whole time.

We managed to trace Nan's family all the way back to my great-great-great-great-grandfather, Robert Francis

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Coombs. He was a light-skinned Black man who owned twenty-six enslaved people, a story that laid bare the complexities of enslavement. Lots of Black and mixed-race people actually participated in slave ownership – it was a way to gain status in the local community. It's something I don't think we hear about much because it complicates a lot of narratives for people, but at the end of the day, this was a way they thought they could survive – and even prosper – in a barbaric system created by white colonists. I hadn't really had time to think about how heavy it would be to learn so much about my family so quickly. I'd expected to discover my ancestors had been enslaved, but never the story that was now being presented to me. I kept thinking, 'How can someone own another's life?' Having to hear, and repeat, this information on camera is what makes the show, I suppose, but I'd forgotten this was a TV programme: it was my life and my family. For some reason my mum flashed into my head, and how she felt trapped in her life. The tears came rushing out. Robert Coombs was rare, in that he left provisions for an enslaved woman, Eleanor, and the children she bore him. But he still owned people. There's no getting away from that.

While visiting his grave in Jamaica, I met a local man who told me that everyone in the area was descended from Robert Coombs. He greeted me as a relative and told me: 'If you don't know where you're coming from, you don't know where you're going.'

He was right. I felt a part of me I didn't even realise was missing slot into place. It blows my mind to think that both

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sides of my family travelled so far, to pitch up in the same little patch of east London, just a stone's throw from one another. And that some of them were actively involved in the battle to ensure the diversity and freedom of the East End could prevail. It makes me even more proud to say I'm from the area; I'm an East Ender to my core.

But there's still people out there who think I should disown the traits that give away my roots. Growing up, when I watched TV, the presenters all looked, acted and spoke a certain way. Even the rare Black newsreaders seemed to have that cut-glass accent, like the one my friend Regan Coleman got after being sent to elocution lessons by her parents. I say 'newsreaders' because I can't really remember any other Black presenters growing up – only the likes of Andi Peters on kids' TV and Oprah, who Nan would let me watch with her.

I was even more conscious of my voice when I began broadcasting. And I quickly received confirmation that the way I spoke was not 'usual'. I remember getting detailed feedback after a work placement at Sky that said I would never make it as a presenter because my accent wasn't right. I was stunned. I read the message as I was coming up the escalator to catch the train home from London Bridge. It was one of those amazing days in the city where the sun was blazing and everyone seemed to be in a fantastic mood because of it. But my smile quickly sank into a frown. How could people in the industry fail to see that diverting from the 'usual' was a problem – for them! The lack of diversity on our screens was impacting quality; they

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needed different perspectives and voices. 'Well,' I thought, 'I'm not going to change. I'm gonna show them.'

Yet even when I began finding success as a presenter at the BBC, I was still on the receiving end of remarks about my accent. I remember talking to producers Louise Sutton and Steve Rudge, asking whether I should get elocution lessons to 'fit in'.

'No,' they both told me. 'People need to see you being you. It's a reflection of the UK that people have regional accents.'

They reminded me that I always say 'I am proud of where I come from', and that holding on to my accent was part of that. It would have been so easy to direct me to those lessons to keep others happy, but I'm grateful to Lou and Steve, who saw the importance of having voices like mine front and centre on a platform like the BBC.

In July 2021, I was named as part of the BBC's Olympic broadcasting team, an immensely proud moment. It was nearly ten years after I'd participated in the Games as an athlete (more on that later!) and felt like a real milestone in a completely new field. Still, I'll be real: it was the hardest broadcasting job I've ever done to date. The absolute graft needed to stay across every single sport, even events taking place throughout the night, coupled with dawn rises to interview the Olympians who've just won medals – the apparatus that goes into Olympics coverage is a non-stop machine. Actually being on screen for an hour and a half every night was the easy bit!

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On 30 July, I'd just finished up the day's highlight show, presenting alongside Clare Balding. I was exhausted and, honestly, probably should have stayed offline altogether during that period – I was all too aware of the trolling I was most probably going to receive. Whatever I did on TV was met with racist and sexist messages on social media, ranging from overt discrimination to suggestions that I only got my job because I'm ticking some mythical 'diversity' box. But logging on briefly sometimes feels like an escape; I was spending all of my waking hours watching sport, talking about sport, and sometimes just ten minutes breaking out of my bubble at the end of the night reminded me the world outside was still there. Yet when I opened up Twitter, a tweet caught my eye. It was from a user with the name 'Lord Digby Jones', and as I processed what it said, I felt my stomach drop.

'Enough!' Lord Jones' post read. 'I can't stand it anymore! Alex Scott spoils a good presentational job on the BBC Olympics Team with her very noticeable inability to pronounce her "g"s at the end of a word. Competitors are NOT taking part, Alex, in the fencin, rowin, boxin, kayakin, weightliftin & swimmin.'

Trolling from anonymous accounts I had learned to brush past. But this wasn't trolling. This was a peer, slating my accent, slating *me* and my ability to do my job. It was exactly what I'd feared, going into the Games. I knew I was going to be judged every which way for who I was, and even more so given I was alongside a familiar and seasoned pro in Clare Balding, beloved by audiences. I'd put

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so much pressure on myself to not give those who wanted to see me fail any satisfaction. But here was something I couldn't – and didn't – want to change: my accent.

I sat on the sofa, reading the tweet over and over again. It was 11pm now and I was going back and forth in my head, debating with myself.

'Just ignore it.'

'No, I've bloody had enough!'

'Just forget about it.'

'Why me? Why can't people see I'm just trying to do my job to the best of my ability, that's all I'm doing.'

'Pour a glass of wine . . . forget about it . . . You have another show tomorrow, it's fine.'

'Nope, that's it . . . I've had enough of it. I'm proud of where I'm from.'

I started typing out a reply to Lord Jones. Then I stopped, and messaged Michelle Sultan, a renowned hair stylist I was working with. She was quite new in my life but was one of those people who feel like they've been there from the very beginning. From the moment I started working with Michelle, I knew she would tell me what she always thought, and not just what I wanted to hear. I trusted her. And she knew the industry like the back of her hand, while also coming from a similar background to me.

It was midnight now and I didn't expect a reply but Michelle was awake. We texted back and forth and she reiterated the advice I'd been given on previous occasions:

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don't change for anyone. Michelle said she didn't think it would be a good idea to respond to Lord Jones. It would only give the tabloids more material and distract from the work I was doing. 'OK,' I typed back, and said goodnight.

But I couldn't stop thinking about it. I'd said I wouldn't reply to Lord Jones. The rule was not to add fuel to the fire. But this was burning away inside me, regardless. I was used to critique; this wasn't critique. It was classism, pure and simple, a personal attack on me and my upbringing. So I opened up Twitter and tapped out a response in three tweets, attaching a favourite quote from another Michelle, the former First Lady of the United States: 'When they go low, we go high.'

'I'm from a working class family in East London, Poplar, Tower Hamlets & I am PROUD,' I wrote. 'Proud of the young girl who overcame obstacles, and proud of my accent! It's me, it's my journey, my grit.'

In the final message, I posted an excerpt from one of my favourite Maya Angelou poems, having grown up with her writing and feeling it speak to me, like she was putting pen to paper about my life.

'You may shoot me with your words, you may cut me with your eyes, you may kill me with your hatefulness, but still, like air, I'll rise.'

I captioned the Angelou extract with a little sign-off just for Lord Jones: 'Tweets like this just give me the energy to keep going. See you tomorrow . . . live on BBC baby.'

Pressing 'send' felt good. Really good. Like I'd stood up for myself, instead of ignoring the disrespect as was

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my normal approach. And with that, I managed to put my phone down and snatch a few hours of sleep.

When I woke up, I'd forgotten about the events of the previous night. Then I saw a WhatsApp message from my manager, Sara.

'Have you seen the reaction?' she'd written.

Sleepily, I replied: 'Reaction to what?'

'Alex . . . your tweet.'

Oh, crap. Hastily, I sent Sara an apology, panicking about the fallout. But Sara's next message stopped me in my tracks.

'No, Alex, don't say sorry – have you seen the reaction of support for you?'

I hadn't even considered that part. Opening up Twitter, I found my notifications flooded, but not with abuse. Instead, people were sharing stories of discrimination they'd experienced thanks to their accents, how they'd been denied opportunities, jobs, mortgages. I couldn't believe what I was reading.

Then I spotted a reply to Lord Jones from Stephen Fry.

'You are everything linguists and true lovers of language despise,' Stephen had written. 'Also, since we're being picky, you are not "Lord Digby Jones", you are Digby, Lord Jones. There's a world of difference. But however you're titled, you disgrace the upper house with your misplaced snobbery.'

Months earlier, Stephen Fry had been a guest while I was presenting *The One Show*, promoting his new book, *Troy: The Siege of Troy Retold*. I'd read it beforehand to prepare and

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found it fascinating. When it was time for his appearance, I told him all about how much I'd enjoyed the book and how I'd travelled around Greece as a way to learn the history and educate myself in a different way because I'd struggled with the teaching styles at school. We had a great conversation – Stephen taught me about the area of London I was from, telling me stories I'd never heard. I was transfixed. I never once felt like I had to pretend I was something I wasn't, and he could see how interested I was in what he was saying. There's been plenty of times I've worried about how guests from certain backgrounds might be with me because of my imposter syndrome, and I never forgot how comfortable I felt with Stephen. So to see THE Stephen Fry defend me like that, against someone who was a lot closer to his world than I was . . . it meant everything. I cried, of course.

I was so sad, not just for me, but at the stories I was being sent of how people had been made to feel, just because of the way they spoke. And yet I still had to go to work. I headed to the production office. Even though my stomach was churning, I didn't want anyone to assume there was something wrong – it felt like this would be a sign of weakness, that I couldn't handle the negativity that comes with being front and centre on a TV show. I didn't think any of the producers would have seen what was going on. I'd told my then-publicist Charlotte that I wasn't prepared to do any interviews or issue a statement in response to the press requests that were streaming in. I'd said everything I needed to in my tweets.

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Even though I was receiving an amazing outpouring of support, I still felt utterly deflated. Why was I putting myself through this? Was I even strong enough to keep fighting these trolls? I was tired and drained, with the added stress of knowing that now I also had to memorise which words would be coming up in the script with a 'g' on the end. I thought if I made any mistakes that evening, Lord Digby Jones would win. I was just so tired of being judged, for being Black, for being a woman, for what I wore, for where I came from, for how I sounded. It felt non-stop. The old adage was true: I had to work twice as hard just to be judged as 'OK'.

I managed to hold it together throughout the show. But just as I began to introduce the final segment, a round-up of events we hadn't broadcast coverage of yet, I realised the autocue had been changed. I felt a grin spread over my face as I read out my line: 'So far we've been runnin', ridin', shootin', scorin', swimmin' and puttin', but we've still got a lot of gold to uncover.'

The next day, a work colleague Paddy told me it had been him who changed my line. In his early years he'd gone through similar situations of being judged on his accent and said he knew exactly how it felt. Of course, everyone had known what was going on with me that day, I realised. And this was their way of showing support, of saying: 'Stay strong, remember who you are and where you come from, always.'

From Jamaica to Poplar, these places and these people are with me always.

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