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A Serving of Scandal

Written by Prue Leith

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PRUE LEITH

A SERVING OF
SCANDAL

Quercus

CHAPTER ONE

‘Are you waiting at table then? You can hardly do it in chef’s whites.’

The voice was not friendly. Kate turned from the sink to see Dennis, the Foreign Office butler, lips pursed, and eyes narrowed behind his designer frames. Hell, she thought. Why him? Why couldn’t I have had Tom, or Rodrigo? Dennis was the head butler and a pain. Reaching round her back for the dishcloth tucked into her apron to dry her hands, she said, ‘Hello, Dennis, I didn’t know you were here. It’s only a working lunch isn’t it?’

‘This is One Carlton Gardens,’ he replied, ‘and the official residence of the Foreign Secretary. We have standards to maintain.’

Kate, knowing she must work with the man, said evenly, ‘And I will not let you down, don’t worry. But I did clear my waitressing with Julian, and I’ll wear a black apron over the top. It’ll be fine.’

Dennis gave his head a little shake of disapproval. He did not like the facilities manager, to whom they all reported.

Kate said, ‘Of course if you want to do it, that would be wonderful, but as it’s such a tiny job I said I could manage on my own.’ Better lay it on thick, she thought, and added, ‘I’m sure you’ve got much more important stuff to see to.’

‘I have, as it happens, though I do not like to leave the Secretary of State unattended, even for a small working lunch.’

She shrugged, pulling her mouth down in an ironic *moue*.

‘Everyone, even the government, is trying to save money. The budget is so tight, I’ll be lucky if I cover my costs. Julian seemed to think I could do it for the price of the food.’

‘What do you mean? You make a fortune.’

‘I wish. I do OK, but not on a job for four. If it was anyone other than the Foreign and Commonwealth Office I’d have turned it down, but I’ve got to impress the new boss.’ She picked up two sauté pans and shoved them upside down onto the pot rack.

Dennis, leaning against the fridge, was inspecting his nails, which irritated Kate. She’d have liked him out of her kitchen. Only it wasn’t her kitchen.

‘You won’t get the catering contract here, you know,’ he said. ‘We have our own chef and he’s *really* good.’ He shrugged and turned to study his reflection in the shiny chrome fish kettle. ‘Only he’s sick today, so needs must.’

Kate had to make an effort not to rise to this. ‘Dennis, come on . . . you know all I’m after is keeping my place on the approved list of party caterers for the department. Oliver Stapler has a reputation as something of a foodie and he might just have a pet caterer of his own. I don’t want some Chelsea girl with connections shoe-horning me out.’

Dennis gave a dismissive little snort. ‘That’s all gone now. Government jobs have to be awarded after a proper selection process. You were lucky you got in before the rules changed.’

Thanks very much, thought Kate. But she kept her tone pleasant as she laid out her starter plates on the worktop and switched the subject back to practicalities.

‘Are you doing the drinks or do you want me to? The starter and pud are cold, so I can easily manage it.’

‘No, of course not. A sommelier’s job can’t be done by any Tom, Dick or Harry.’

What a tosser, she thought; they'd only drink water anyway, but she was determined not to give him any ammunition so she smiled and said, 'Well, at least I am none of those.'

'I'm more concerned about you doing the waiter's job,' said Dennis.

'Since you've decided to do it yourself, I'm prepared to run you through the do's and don'ts.'

Kate would have liked to punch his self-important paunch, but said, 'It's fine, Dennis. I was a waitress long before I was a cook, and I can still carry a row of plates up my arm – *and* serve from the left and clear from the right. Don't worry, I won't let you down.'

She watched him glide out of the kitchen with an almost imperceptible sway of his hips, his nose very slightly in the air and his hands held a few inches away from his body. He wore the regulation butler's uniform but always managed to look infinitely smarter than the others: his striped worsted trousers perfectly cut, starched white cuffs just visible under his tailored jacket, the tie of thick black silk, shoes (even the heels) polished like new. And he always smelt expensive.

I bet he shaves that bald head, thought Kate. And wears silver hoops in his ears – she'd noticed they were pierced – when off duty. She had a sudden vision of Dennis dancing in a gay club, kissing the neck of a young lad. She shuddered. Well, at least there was no danger of his pushing her up against a storeroom door.

Kate walked confidently and purposefully about the kitchen but she was anxious. As she ground coriander into the spiced potatoes, and turned them carefully in the pan, her mind stayed on Dennis. She really did not like him, and she was unused to disliking people. Also, she was made uneasy by Dennis's obvious dislike of her. Why did he try so hard to get up her nose? Surely

it was easier and pleasanter to get on with your colleagues? He was charm itself to the clients, nothing too much trouble: Yes, Sir; Certainly, Minister; At once, M'lady. And he was very good at his job, which no doubt accounted for his rise to head butler. But below stairs he was poison, a master of drama. His staff never quite knew if they were in favour or out, and he certainly had it in for all outside contractors – especially the females.

All she could do was take no notice, tread carefully, and give Dennis no cause for complaint. She was as conscious as he that one word from him to the facilities manager and she would not be hired again.

Very soon, in the stress-free enjoyment of such a simple job, Kate had forgotten all about Dennis. She laid the table with care. The silver, china and linen were provided by the Foreign Office and, to Dennis's credit, everything sparkled. She was pleased with herself for bringing a bunch of snowdrops as a centrepiece. The department did not run to extra flowers for internal or inter-departmental events, and though the main rooms would have flowers or plants, the dining table would not. That she and Toby had been out in the garden last night, picking the flowers, was a thought that cheered her. It had been almost dark, but the snowdrops had glowed bright white and the five-year old had dashed from clump to clump, filling his plump hands.

The raw peeled beetroot for the goats' cheese starter went through the Robot Coupe in a single long push, and the fine red julienne strips snaked into the bowl below like magic. She sprinkled them with lemon juice and sea salt. She'd have liked to add fresh mint but it was January and, over the years, she'd become ever keener on sticking to seasonal produce. She made four neat piles of beetroot in the centre of each plate and

surrounded them with chunks of goat's cheese and fresh walnuts, then garnished each with a few young beet leaves (poly-tunnel grown, but at least English). All they needed now was a drizzle of good olive oil before serving.

Rather than risk disturbing the look of her salads with plastic wrap – which she hated wasting in any case, as well as feeling guilty that it was non-biodegradable – she covered each plate with an upended soup bowl and left them on the side. She wanted the cheese to soften slightly to develop its flavour.

Kate liked cooking on her own. She was fast and methodical, constantly wiping her boards as she used them, washing up as she went along, putting things away. She swung round the kitchen now, tossing debris into the bin, stirring a pot here, flicking salt into a pan there, slamming the bread rolls into a hot oven. She cut deep slashes through the skin of the sea bass fillets, noticing with approval how fresh and thick they were. The fish was wild and had cost a bit, but it was worth it; farmed sea bass were so often skinny and tasteless. She lay the fillets on the greased grill pan. Once she'd got the first course in front of the diners, she'd brush them with melted butter, salt them and bang them under the blazing grill. Seven minutes should do it, then she could whip them off and let them settle while she cleared the first course.

The leeks were cooked and delicious, the spiced potatoes ditto, the plates warm. The dessert was finely sliced pineapple with a thin dusting of five-spice powder and castor sugar, and the thinnest of ginger thins, made to her grandmother's recipe. No cheese, just coffee, and exactly four perfect chocolates, filled with brandied cherries. Her friend Talika made those and they cost a fortune.

The Secretary of State was late, of course, but they sat down straight away. Dennis unfolded their napkins and laid them

reverently on their laps (a carry-on that always amused Kate – surely grown men could open out their own napkins?) and she went round with the hot bread rolls, then put the beetroot salads in front of them.

She had time for a good look at the new Foreign Secretary. He had presence, no doubt of that, and he was good looking in an elegant old-fashioned way. ‘Patrician’ the press called him. He sat straight in his chair, very still, his hands in his lap, and yet he looked as relaxed as his colleagues who leant on the table or lounged back in their chairs. He did not acknowledge her.

His hair was prematurely grey – at forty-five he was one of the youngest members of cabinet – but it suited him. She could see why the tabloids had him down for a snob and a toff in spite of his Labour credentials. His stillness and silence were unnerving. He listened, nodded, seldom commented, and when he picked up his knife and fork to eat his first course, or his glass to take a sip of water, he did so with no unnecessary movement. His stillness made Kate notice how the other guests pushed their food about the plate, ran their fingers up and down the goblet stem, shifted back and sat forward in their chairs.

When Kate served the Foreign Secretary’s sea bass, it struck her, as it so often did, that well-brought up people with apparently impeccable manners could not spare the time for a quick glance or a thank you when their food was put before them. Besides, she thought crossly, that fish dish was faultless: the skin was crisp and brown, the flesh plump, moist, glowing white through the cuts in the crusty skin, the fillet sitting on a perfect round of chopped young leeks in a cream sauce. And to the side, a delicate castle (she had used a mould to get a perfect shape) of crumbly, golden, spicy potatoes. And it smelt like heaven. Even he, living off the fat of the land, could not get lunch that good every day. You’d think he’d not seen the plate

before him, but since he promptly set about eating it, he obviously had.

Dennis deigned to serve the coffee but disappeared as soon as the guests had gone, leaving Kate to clear away and wash up alone. She didn't mind. If it had been one of the other butlers she would have liked the help and the chat – butlers always knew all the political gossip, true and false – but she'd rather have no help at all than that of the petulant Dennis.

By three o'clock everything was done, grill and cooker-top cleaned, floor mopped, rubbish bagged. As Kate picked up her handbag, a smartly suited young man with dark hair and glasses appeared in the kitchen doorway.

'Kate McKinnon? I'm Sean, PPS to the Foreign Secretary. He sent me to have a word.'

Kate's heart sank. 'Was something wrong?'

'No, no, not at all. He was delighted. He said to tell you he has seldom had a better lunch, and do you do private dinner parties?'

'Whew, that's a relief.' She fished in her bag for a business card. 'Yes, of course I cook private dinners. Love to.'

'Well, he's got a dinner arranged for next Thursday at his own house in Lambeth, but the chef here was to have done it and, as you know, he's ill. I was about to appeal to Government Hospitality to find us another, but since he likes your food . . .?'

Kate nodded, 'I'd be happy to step in, but I'll have to check my diary. I'm pretty sure it will be OK, though.' It will have to be, she thought.

Sean looked at her card. "Nothing Fancy." He smiled. 'He'll like that. I'll be in touch.'

Kate picked up her handbag and ran her eyes over the kitchen one last time to make sure there was no smudge of grease or

crumb on the floor that Dennis could complain of. Then she hurried down the corridor to the cloakroom.

She stopped at the sight of herself in the mirror, unused to the black apron. She usually wrapped a white chef's apron round her middle, its multiple folds round her waist giving her a dumpy look. At five foot three and nine stone plus she would never be tall and thin, but the long black apron down to her calves and wrapped tightly round her waist made her look slimmer and taller than she was. And the white of her jacket set off her Celtic colouring, right now heightened by the kitchen heat. She did not wear a chef's skullcap or toque because it was a struggle to stuff her mop of dark curls into them. She knew she was meant to, but no one had ever challenged her and, as yet, no customer had found a hair in the soup. Her other non-regulation touches were her gold earrings, chunky little hoops which she wore all the time, even in bed or the bath.

She gave her reflection a brief nod. Bravo, she told herself, a very good day. Everything worked, cooked lovely food, managed not to fight with the poisonous Dennis, impressed the boss.

Best of all, I'll be home in time for Toby's tea.

CHAPTER TWO

Oliver was irritated with himself. He had fallen asleep in the train from Euston, and the thought of his Queensmead constituents seeing their elected MP snoring was horrible. What if someone used a mobile phone to take a shot of him slumped and open mouthed, and sent it to *Private Eye* or posted it on YouTube?

He caught the eye of Jim, his detective, sitting opposite him. He rose and stretched for Oliver's overcoat in the rack above his seat. Oliver picked up the slightly battered 'red box' that told the world he was a cabinet minister. He sometimes thought he should use an ordinary briefcase or one of those wheelee things, or even a backpack carried over one shoulder as his younger officials did. But he was proud of his position, and the red box was a badge of honour. No one, he told himself, should be ashamed of being a politician. Anthony Trollope was right to believe that 'to sit in the British Parliament should be the highest object of ambition to every educated Englishman.'

They stepped from the First Class compartment onto the fume-filled platform at Birmingham New Street and hurried to the taxi rank, hoping to beat the queue. But, as usual, it curved the length of the pavement in front of the station. Damn, a good fifteen-minute wait.

Of course, as Foreign Secretary, he could be driven from Whitehall to his Staffordshire door in a comfortable Government

Jag, the uniformed Debbie at the wheel and the detective beside her. But on a late Friday afternoon that would have taken a good two and a half hours, and, anyway, he considered it his duty sometimes to travel as ordinary citizens did. Not, he thought ruefully, that First Class, with a detective in tow, a driver at one end and a taxi at the other, all paid for by the taxpayer, was exactly slumming it.

Jim kept the taxi to return to the station. His replacement, a copper seconded from the local nick, was already at the Stapler front gate.

As Oliver stepped into the kitchen (they seldom used the front door) and called out Ruth's name, he secretly hoped she would be out. He would dearly like a quiet quarter of an hour in front of the television news with a whisky in his hand and Obi-Wan Kenobi, their Jack Russell, lying across his foot.

But Ruth emerged from the boot room, still wearing her Barbour and scarf, with her jeans tucked into thick socks. Her muddy wellies were dangling from one hand. She padded across the tiles to the sink, pausing on the way to offer her cheek for a kiss. She began washing the boots under the tap.

'You're early,' she said.

'And you're out very late aren't you? Darling, you're not mucking out or riding in the dark?'

'I've been lunging one of the yearlings in the school. We floodlit it, remember? So I could work at night?'

He had forgotten. He wasn't really interested in Ruth's ponies, except that they kept her busy and moderately happy. She was a much respected breeder of Welsh cobs, with buyers from all over the country and often from abroad. Yet, though she let the old hay barn to a saddler and two of the paddocks to a neighbouring farmer, and ran the yard as economically as she could, the business lost money more years than it made any

and the maintenance of farm buildings, stables and land was a worry.

When the girls were very little, both competing in local gymkhanas and going to Pony Club camp in a field half a mile away, he took more interest. He shared with Ruth the pleasure of seeing how many of the ponies being lovingly groomed by their young owners – chequerboard patterns brushed into their gleaming rumps, manes tied with little ribbons, tails plaited, hooves oiled – had been bred by Ruth. She could name them all, and they would sit on a hay bale together watching the jumping, and chalking up ‘their’ rosettes.

But once the girls got really serious about their riding, Oliver had begun to feel excluded. He did not ride himself and couldn’t spare the time to travel miles to see his daughters compete in three-day events or horse shows. Sometimes he felt his only role in the family was to write cheques for more horses, new saddles, bigger horseboxes, endless vet’s bills.

‘I’ll light the fire,’ he said. ‘Shall I get you a drink?’

As soon as they had sat down in front of the fire, whiskies in hand, and Obi had taken up his favourite position on Oliver’s left foot, the girls clattered down the stairs and erupted into the room. Neither looked at their father.

‘What’s for supper, Mum?’ asked Andrea as Mattie said, ‘Mum, Can I have a beer?’

Ruth just shook her head at this, but Oliver said, ‘Of course not. You’re only fourteen.’

‘Nearly fifteen.’

‘... And you don’t even like beer.’

Ruth said, ‘Leave it, Oliver. She’s only doing it for effect.’ She turned to Andrea, ‘It’s bangers and mash. And salad. But nothing’s cooked yet.’

‘But Mum, we’re starving! How long till supper?’

‘Depends if I get any assistance. How about helping? That would speed things up.’ Ruth’s voice had an edge of sarcasm to it that made Oliver long to intervene, but he knew better than to inflame her. ‘Like cook the sausages?’ she persisted. ‘Or make the mash? Or make the salad? Or lay the table?’

‘OK, OK, we get the message,’ muttered Mattie.

I could do without this, thought Oliver. Ruth was plainly exhausted and grumpy. He said, ‘Look, girls, sit down and join the conversation, or go away and we’ll call you when it’s ready.’

The girls sloped out of the room and thudded upstairs again.

Ruth looked at him, faintly hostile. ‘You, I suppose, had a delicious lunch, served by a flunky in white gloves?’

Oliver pretended she was teasing, and said with a smile. ‘No white gloves, sadly. Delicious lunch though, some new cook. Nice girl. She seemed to be the waiter too.’

‘Three courses? Wine? Chocolates? Liqueurs?’

He could not go on ignoring her tone. ‘Ruth darling, don’t be snarky. It’s been a long tough week, in spite of the ministerial perks you object to so much.’

‘If we are to compete on tough weeks, darling Oliver, I think I win hands down.’

He took a slow sip of his whisky and said evenly, ‘I’m sorry. What went wrong?’

‘What didn’t? Neither of those two mares we put to Welsh Dragon at that stud halfway to bloody Scotland are in foal. It pissed with rain all week so the only work I could do was in the covered school. Little Nonny is lame, and the sale of the chestnut, Ruby, fell through. Oh yes, the cost of feed has gone up from the first of next month by four per cent which makes it eleven per cent up on last year. Is that enough to be going on with? And please don’t tell me I should give up the ponies.’

‘I wasn’t going to. You’ve made it very clear you want to stick with it.’ He stood up, fetched the whisky bottle and poured her another half-inch. His free hand on her shoulder, he said, ‘It’s just sad that it’s giving you so much grief and no pleasure.’

She looked up at him, suddenly contrite and said, ‘I’m sorry, Oliver. I’m tired, the girls are driving me nuts and I haven’t made the supper. And I want a shower.’

Relieved, Oliver sank back into his chair and smiled. ‘Darling, don’t worry. I read somewhere that for most couples the risk of flare-ups is highest when one of them walks through the door. He wants slippers and pipe and cosseting, and she wants appreciation.’

‘Do you want slippers and pipe?’

‘Do you want appreciation?’

‘Yes, too right I do!’

Oh God, thought Oliver, she’s going to take off again. I’m too tired for this.

She went on, ‘I work bloody hard, mostly on my own, and do all the domestic stuff. So when you swan in looking sleek as an otter, I guess it gets up my nose.’

‘Would it make you feel better if I told you I fell asleep on the train, and no, that wasn’t due to a boozy lunch, I never drink at lunch. It’s because I went to bed at three a.m. last night because I had to finish my boxes when I got back from an extremely tedious dinner at the QEII Conference Centre. And that the PM is not finding me as pliable as he’d hoped and I fear we will not agree on West Africa. And the Chancellor told us today that he wants fifteen per cent out of everyone’s budgets because we are in deep shit on the debt front—’

‘OK, OK. I concede that grave affairs of state outrank mere domestic problems.’

Oliver stood up abruptly. 'Ruth, this is not a competition. Look, why don't you go and have your shower. I'll watch the news.'

After half an hour Ruth was not yet down. Oliver walked into the kitchen and yanked open the fridge. There were two packs of sausages – good butchers' ones, he was glad to see. He tipped them into a roasting pan and used the scissors to separate them, then slid the pan into the top oven of the Aga.

He found the packet of frozen mash in the freezer, stabbed the bag with the tip of a knife and put it in the microwave. While he waited for the blocks to thaw he heated the milk and butter.

He liked cooking. It was calming. He stood quietly stirring the mash until it was smooth, then ground some black pepper into it, suddenly wondering if that jolly little cook with the plump round face ever stooped to frozen mash.

By the time he had tossed the salad the girls had reappeared and the sausages were almost done. He flipped them all over to brown them evenly, and put them back in the oven. Then he rummaged around in the cupboard for the onion marmalade, which he and Ruth liked, and the ketchup without which the girls didn't seem able to swallow anything.

'Andrea, go and call your mother, will you? And Mattie, could you lay the table? Knives and forks, big plates, the salad servers, two lots of serving spoons. And glasses, some paper napkins and salt and pepper. Got that?'

'Do I have to?'

'If you want any supper you do.'

Oliver wanted to tell Mattie to take her earphones off, and concentrate on the job in hand. She failed on the salad servers, napkins, and pepper and salt, but Oliver lacked the energy for a confrontation. Eventually the table was laid and the food was

on it, looking good and smelling delicious. Oliver fetched a bottle of wine and a corkscrew and the three of them sat down at the table.

Ruth had still not appeared, but Oliver resisted the girls' demands to eat without her. No, he said, this is a family meal, and we need to have it together. But he was tempted to just dish up.

Why did his wife have to be so awkward? It had only taken him twenty minutes to put the supper together, which surely she could have managed hours ago. Because she hadn't, it was now nine-thirty and they were all hungry and cross.

He sometimes thought Ruth was still fighting the good feminist fight, which had largely been won before she was out of primary school. Daily, or at least weekly, she proved that she did not have to do what he wanted.

Of course, her waywardness was what had attracted him in the first place. He had loved the fact that she – beautiful, intelligent and rich – was scornful, even outraged, at the preoccupations of her generation. In those days she never wore make-up, she ripped the power shoulder pads out of any jacket or suit she bought, and she loathed the Spice Girls and Mrs Thatcher with equal venom.

She'd disapproved of the rampant money-centredness of eighties Toryism, and when they married she had refused her father's offer of a big marquee wedding (he was High Sheriff of the county and a Labour life peer – a reward, according to Ruth, for his largesse to the party). Instead, she had insisted he give the money he would have spent on their nuptials to Refuge, the battered wives' charity.

But now Oliver found her little gestures of independence, like not making supper or refusing to attend any political or business functions with him, petty and sad.

Oliver chose not to see Mattie sneak her fork into the bowl of mash and eat a mouthful. Poor girl, they were all very hungry. He got up and fetched the bread and some butter. He cut the girls a slice each. 'Here,' he said, 'eat this. Mum will be down in a minute.'

'What's for pudding?' asked Andrea.

'God knows. I've no idea,' he replied, and realised that it was the first time he had been deliberately disloyal to Ruth in front of the children. His tone had plainly said, 'Ask your mother. Her responsibility. Which she's failing at.'

Then Ruth appeared, looking more cheerful and dressed in a much-washed black and white kaftan that hugged her slender body. She had her fair hair scraped back with a comb, exposing her fine eyes, straight nose and long neck. She had never needed make-up to look good. All she needed, thought Oliver, was to smile.

He tried to get some conversation going, but Ruth seemed distracted, Andrea answered questions about school without enthusiasm and Mattie complained, 'Dad, why do we have to talk at supper? It's boring. Why can't we just eat and go, like other families? And why do we have to have supper in the kitchen anyway? Jason's family eat in front of the telly. It's cool.'

Sometimes I wonder why I come home at all, thought Oliver. Ruth is clearly unhappy and the girls have nothing to say to me. So much for the fruits of success.