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One Secret Summer

Written by Lesley Lokko

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One Secret Summer

Lesley Lokko



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PART ONE

Prologue

Mougins, France, June 1969

The dull, mechanical sound of metal hitting the earth came to the young woman as if from far, far away. She watched in silence, arms wrapped tightly around her waist, as the two men scooped out a small, shallow hole in the ground, pausing only to wipe their faces or mark out the limits of the dig. An owl whooshed past, his gentle enquiring call puncturing the balmy night air. The smell of olive and pine trees drifted up to her from the valley below; she knew already the scent would be with her for the rest of her life.

Finally it was done. One of the men called out something softly in their own language to the other. She watched as the small bundle was passed carefully to him, already wrapped in the white muslin sheet that was their custom, and placed into the ground. A tiny stifled sound escaped from her throat but was swallowed up in the soft ‘thwack’ of earth as they quickly began covering the hole up again. It took them almost no time at all. The ground was patted flat, the flagstones replaced, stamped over, made new. In the morning they would begin the work of resurfacing the driveway . . . in a few days, no one would ever know what lay beneath. Buried, disposed of, forgotten. She would never see the men again. That was part of the deal. Neither looked at her as they walked past; that, too, was part of the deal. She turned and watched them as they put away the shovels in the small lean-to at the top of the drive, and then they were gone. She waited for a few moments and then walked slowly back into the house and bolted the door behind her. Her teeth were chattering. She poured herself a

brandy and took it into the living room. She couldn't bear to go upstairs.

She curled herself up beside the empty fireplace where she'd slept for the past six nights, clutching her drink. It took her almost the entire glass to stop shivering. She forced herself to think of what would happen next. Alongside the new driveway, in the morning something else would be delivered. Something that would put an end to the nightmare that had begun a week ago and make everything all right. Everything. Nothing would have changed; it would never have happened. No one would ever know. She took one last swallow of brandy, willing herself desperately to believe it. No one *could* ever know. If it ever came out, she would be finished. They would all be finished. There was simply no other way, no other choice. This was how it would be. Always.

I

JOSH

Mougins, France, July 1973

The ground underfoot was hot in that delicious, beginning-of-the-summer-holidays way; air electric with the sound of insects pulsing thickly with banked-up warmth. Overhead the intense blue sky yawned endlessly towards the horizon. Josh Keeler, four years old and marching along the path with all the determination of a seasoned jungle explorer, could scarcely contain his excitement. Ahead of him, his two older brothers, Rafe and Aaron, danced their way around the reassuringly solid shape of Harvey, their father. Trailing behind, in a pretty flowery dress of the sort she only ever wore on holiday, Diana, their mother, brought up the rear, humming to herself in a way that she never did in London.

The pink oleanders that lined the path to the pool swatted his face as he hurried after them, anxious to keep up. His whole body was suffused with anticipatory joy. This year he was going to learn how to swim. His brothers were already strong swimmers; they'd had lessons at school. Josh was just about to begin. It was hard being the youngest, especially when Rafe and Aaron took no more notice of him than they did of Buster, the family dog. He longed to be like them; for them to like him. He couldn't understand why they didn't.

It was almost as warm inside the silky envelope of the pool as it was outside. He felt the gentle pressure of his father's hand cupping his chin and tried to remember what he'd been told about frogging his legs to keep his body level with the surface of the water. Rafe and Aaron were clowning around confidently

at the far end of the pool, scrambling in and out of the water and diving in off the side. It would be years before he could do any of that, he thought to himself miserably as he struggled to stay afloat. A few seconds later, he heard Rafe shouting. He felt his father's attention leave; his fleshy, breathing presence momentarily disengaging itself as he turned towards Rafe. The water pushed away from him as Harvey lunged out. There was a sudden lull, as if he were falling, and then everything seemed to happen at once. Water rushed up at him, covering his mouth and nose. He panicked, swinging his arms wildly above his head as his legs dropped and the water closed over his face again. He burst through the surface, clawing at the air, but there was nothing to hold on to. He opened his eyes, caught a glimpse of Aaron staring calmly at him before he went under again. No one moved, no hands came out to hold him. It was quiet there in the swirling depths; his lungs were almost bursting with the desire to breathe. He was afraid to open his eyes. The taste of chlorinated water filled his mouth, bubbling upwards painfully through his nose. He felt the hot smarting of tears behind his eyes; shame flooded over him like a stain. It wouldn't do to cry in front of Aaron. Or Rafe, for that matter. It simply wouldn't do.

2

MADDY

New York, September 1991

The Greyhound bus slowly lurched its way into the Midtown Bus Terminal just before dawn. Amongst the thirty-odd passengers gathering their possessions and preparing to disembark was a young woman who was still fast asleep. She lay curled up in her seat, swathed in her black overcoat, only a fiery mass of red curls visible, tumbling halfway down her back. The woman who'd

been sitting next to her for the past sixteen hours paused in the task of pulling her bag from the overhead locker and looked down at her. She smiled indulgently and touched her lightly on the shoulder. 'Wake up, honey,' she murmured, bending down. 'We're here.'

The girl's eyes flew open. For a brief, incomprehensible second, she struggled to remember where she was. She looked around her in bewilderment at the darkened, ghostly interior of the bus, passengers pulling their suitcases and bags from the overhead lockers, a child whimpering somewhere near the front. Where the hell was she? A sudden lurch in the pit of her stomach brought it all rushing back. New York. New York City! She'd finally arrived! She struggled upright and hurriedly pushed her hands through her hair, pulling it into a ponytail, furious with herself. She couldn't believe it! She'd been awake for almost the entire journey, taut with anticipation, every nerve in her body waiting for that moment when she'd look out of the window and see Manhattan emerging out of the early morning mist, right there in front of her – and she'd missed it. She clambered out of her seat, grabbed her coat and bag, still brushing the sleep from her eyes.

'You know where you're going?' Shirley, a plump, recently divorced woman who'd boarded the bus in Franklin, the next stop after Marshalltown, smiled down at her. Shirley was in her early fifties and on her way to stay with her eldest daughter in New Jersey. She was full of advice about New York City, most of it incomprehensible to eighteen-year-old Maddy Stiller, who'd never been further than Chicago and only once at that.

Maddy nodded, hoping she looked and sounded more certain than she felt. 'I . . . I have the address right here,' she said, patting her bag. 'My mom said to take a cab.'

'You do that, honey. Best thing to do. There'll be plenty of them across the road. Just give the driver the address and make sure he's got a NYC sticker in the window. You never know,' she added darkly. 'Well, I hope everything works out for you. I'll be looking to see your name in lights one of these days.'

You take care, now, Maddy. Everything'll turn out fine, you'll see.'

'Th . . . thank you,' Maddy mumbled, cheeks red with embarrassment. She watched Shirley pick up her suitcase and navigate her way confidently through the crowd. She felt a sudden wave of loneliness. As recent an acquaintance as Shirley was, she was the only person she'd spoken to since leaving home. Although she'd have been quite happy to ride the thousand-odd miles from Iowa to New York in silence, Shirley, it was soon clear, wasn't. Shirley was what Martha, Maddy's mother, would have called a 'talker-stalker' – the kind who wouldn't shut up until she'd wormed every last piece of information out of you. She wasn't unkind – just persistent. By the time they reached Des Moines, she'd established that Maddy Stiller had gone to Meskawi High School in Marshalltown, that she was the only daughter of Frank and Martha Stiller and that Frank had disappeared one Sunday afternoon when Maddy was fourteen. Just disappeared. He'd got up early as usual, went out to feed the cows and then came back into the kitchen and announced he was going into Des Moines. He'd driven the white pick-up truck down the road, turned left instead of right and gone all the way to Chicago. He'd left the pick-up truck in the parking lot at O'Hare International Airport with instructions on the wind-screen to call Mrs Martha Stiller of Dewey Farm, Marshall County, Iowa. Martha had driven out with Ron, their neighbour from across the way, in tight-lipped silence. A few weeks later a letter arrived for Martha and a postcard for Maddy. From San Francisco. Maddy read the few lines and then burned it. Apparently there was someone else 'involved'. Maddy didn't know what that meant. Poor Martha, everyone said. No one ever said 'poor Maddy'. 'Oh, we heard *all* about it, honey. Your *poor* mother. Just goes to show, doesn't it? You can just never tell about people, can you?' Maddy looked down at her hands. When people brought up the topic of her father's disappearance, which they usually did as soon as they heard her surname, she never knew what to say. Along the long, flat tongue of Interstate

88, Shirley managed to worm out of her that she'd won a four-year scholarship to study drama and that, aside from her school trip to Chicago, it was the first time she'd ever left Iowa. 'Oh, my,' Shirley breathed, clearly impressed. 'You must be very talented.' Maddy's stomach lurched again and again. Talented? No, she wasn't talented. She just wanted to get out of Iowa, that was all. She still couldn't get over it all. Less than three months after she'd made the application to Tisch, here she was. It felt like a dream.

'These yours?' The brusque voice of the driver interrupted her thoughts. He pointed to the two rather battered suitcases left standing in the hold.

'Yes, those are mine,' Maddy nodded hurriedly.

'Here . . .' He tossed them unceremoniously towards her. 'Ain't got all day,' he said, slamming the hold doors shut. 'Let's get this show on the road!' He slapped the side of the bus and stalked off.

Maddy struggled awkwardly to get them out of the way. She stood on the edge of the sidewalk, clutching her handbag tightly to her chest, trying to ignore the burning sensation of fear in the pit of her stomach, looking around her for a sign – any sign – of where to go and what to do next. People were streaming in and out of the subway station across the street. The sound was deafening. It was nearly 7 a.m. and the entire city seemed to be on the move. People thundered in and out of the narrow hole in the ground, no one speaking, not looking at one another, no eye contact . . . nothing. Bodies rushed past one another, a tangled, indistinguishable mass of people in which unfamiliar details jumped out at her – a skullcap here, a long flowing white robe there; the pitch-black face of a young boy wearing a baseball cap turned backwards, stopping to grab a paper-wrapped bagel; two women in diaphanous black tents, only the slits of their eyes showing, large woven shopping baskets visible through the sheer black material – she'd never seen anything like it. She stood there on the other side of the road, too stunned to do anything other than stare. She thought of her last glimpse of Martha,

standing bravely beside the bus stop, waving at the Greyhound as it lurched around the corner, and the tug of tears crept into her throat once more. She'd turned her head to wave but the corner was already made and Martha was no longer there. Her stomach lurched again, dangerously. She had to get a cab, find the address of the Tisch halls of residence and phone her mother. And find a bathroom. Her stomach, always the most precise register of her nerves, was dangerously close to revolt.

There was a constant line of yellow cabs crawling up the street. She tried to remember what Shirley had said – was it the yellow light to the left or the white light in the centre that indicated an available ride? She couldn't remember. She shuffled along, her suitcases banging awkwardly against her legs and hips, looking for the end of the queue. Several times someone simply stuck out a hand in front of her, jumping into the cab she'd had her eye on. There didn't seem to be a queue. She tried waving a hand like everyone else, but as soon as the cab swung over, someone else simply popped out in front of her and sped off. No one paid the slightest bit of attention to a slender young redhead whose face carried the painful outward expression of her nerves. She was close to tears by the time it happened for the tenth or eleventh time. Didn't these people have any manners? A cab sped up the road towards her. She looked quickly left and right – no one else seemed to be waiting. She waved frantically at it like she'd seen everyone else do. It seemed to work – he appeared to be making straight for her. She stepped down off the sidewalk, determined not to let anyone else grab it before her, still holding on to her suitcases. She heard a sudden screeching of brakes, felt a rush of cool air sweep past her head and then the sound of someone shouting, 'Oh! Oh, my *Gawd!*'

She hit the kerb face first, catching her knee on the edge of one of her damned suitcases. She lay in stunned silence, the sounds of traffic and pedestrians rushing over to her receding slowly into the background as their voices rose. 'What the hell was she trying to do?' 'What happened? Did I do something? Did I hit her?' 'Jesus!'

She tried to lever herself off the ground, her face hot with embarrassment and her cheeks already sticky with tears. She'd tripped over one of the blasted suitcases. Someone bent down to her. 'You OK?' He knelt down so that his face was on a level with hers. He helped her to sit upright, squinted at the cut and pulled out a clean handkerchief, placing it firmly against her eyebrow. 'You've cut yourself – just a scratch, nothing to worry about. When you get home, splash lots of cold water on it. It'll help the cut close quicker.' He had a nice voice. Maddy closed her eyes as he applied a gentle pressure to her forehead. 'It'll stop bleeding soon, don't worry.'

'Darling, she's fine. We're going to be late.' A young woman's impatient voice broke through the babble surrounding her.

'Just a minute. She's bleeding.'

'It's nothing – it's a small scratch, that's all. Just put a plaster on it.' The young woman looked down at the dazed Maddy. 'We're going to miss the first act.' She was beginning to whine.

A middle-aged man bent down, and together they helped Maddy to her feet. 'Will somebody get this girl a cab?' he growled at the small crowd that had gathered to watch. Seconds later, a cab appeared. The driver jumped out, picked up her suitcases as if they were dust, and Maddy was helped into the back seat. Still holding the young man's handkerchief to her forehead, she leaned back against the plastic seats, handed over the scrap of paper with the address of Gramercy House, the first-year hall of residence, and tried not to cry. The cab pulled smartly away from the kerb and was soon swallowed up in the traffic. She lifted a hand and tried to brush her tears discreetly away. It wasn't quite the arrival she'd planned.