

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, **Love**reading will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Bitter Chocolate

Written by Lesley Lokko

Published by Orion

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to **Love**reading.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Prologue

Chicago, USA 1999

'You're sure you don't want me to come with you?' he asked, his eyes searching her face.

She shook her head. 'No, I'd rather go alone.'

'You'll be fine,' he said softly, pulling her towards him. 'You'll know exactly what to do when you see him.'

She sank into the calm solidity of his body. For a moment, she couldn't speak. In less than an hour, thirteen years of wondering would come to an end. She looked down at her hands and began twisting the slim gold band of her wedding ring slowly around. 'Wh ... what if he doesn't want to speak to me?' she asked after a moment.

'He will. Trust me.'

She drew in a deep breath, steadying herself. And then let it out slowly. 'I'd better go,' she said, slowly disengaging herself. 'I'll call you later. When ... when ...'

'Just call when you're ready.' Bending his head the kiss was fierce, almost bruising. 'It's going to be fine,' he said firmly. 'You'll see.' She nodded and walked to the door. He was watching her, the same calm, careful gaze he'd always had, right from the start. She gave him a quick, unhappy smile and opened the door.

Outside it was a chilly November day and the cold, northerly winds were already sweeping in from the lake. She belted her coat and pulled the collar up, tucking her cloudy mass of hair in and trapping its warmth. She walked along Willow to Fremont,

her mind racing ahead of her. What would she say? What *could* she say? How would she explain? She couldn't quite believe she'd found him. After a year of false starts and false, painfully dashed hopes, she'd finally found him. She'd spoken to his parents, Howard and Geraldine, over the phone, twice. Once after the first, tentative letter, thanking them for their understanding and the second time, a few weeks ago, to tell them of her intentions to visit him. On both occasions they'd been cautious but kind. No, they'd never told him, they assured her. Oh, they'd thought about it often enough, but somehow the timing had never been right. They'd talked about it again a few months ago. And then, of course, she'd written to them. Out of the blue.

She walked up Fremont. The oak trees that lined the sidewalk were in the last few days of foliage; the ground underfoot was damp and sticky with their fallen red and gold leaves. She looked up at the houses; it was clear that the Ellisons were very well-off. A tall, elegantly imposing red-brick with magnificent views across the park towards Lake Shore Drive. Yes, they were more than comfortable – after all, how else would they have been able to afford him?

A gust of wind suddenly blew down the street, sending leaves flying. She walked past a tiny basketball court in the open space between two buildings. A group of young men were playing. She stopped for a second to watch.

'Yo! Darrell! Go for it, man!' She stopped suddenly. A young man jumped higher than the others, the grey sweatshirt he was wearing yawned suddenly, baring his stomach. He paused, suspended in the air for a fraction of a second before aiming for the hoop. A shout went up as he landed, half a dozen hands going up in the air to slap his own. *Perfect. Cool, man. Nice shot.* He swivelled as he took up his place at the edge of the court, his eyes meeting hers for a second. He gave her a quick, easy grin. A couple of the other players whistled at her as they took up position at the centre of the court. 'Yo, baby!' one of them shouted. The others laughed. Teenagers. A mixed bunch, all dressed in the standard urban uniform – baggy pants

and hooded sweatshirts. Practically indistinguishable from one another. Except for one. She felt something inside her turn. She felt the blood rise in her cheeks and her heart begin to accelerate. She would have known him anywhere. Anywhere in the world.

I

Port-au-Prince, Haiti 1985

On a hot, sultry afternoon in May when the breeze had stopped and the air was oppressively still, Améline, the *reste-avec* in the St Lazâre household, pushed open the door to the parlour, dragging her bucket and floor polishers behind her. It was three o'clock and the heat was still intense. Madame St Lazâre was taking her customary afternoon siesta and the house was silent. Nothing moved, not even the hands of the grandfather clock in the corner that had stopped when Madame's husband, whom Améline had never seen, died. Or so Madame said. Five minutes past three on a Sunday afternoon. Améline wasn't sure she believed her.

She closed the door behind her carefully. It was the only time she was allowed in the parlour. Cléones, the ancient maid and cook, could no longer bend down and the task of polishing the wooden floorboards had naturally fallen to Améline. She put down her bucket and picked up the dusters, working her way quickly across the surfaces of the dark, heavy furniture that Madame favoured and which showed up every speck of dust, ghostly white, like the talcum powder Améline occasionally sprinkled over her skin on Sundays when she and Cléones went to church. She lifted the brass candlesticks, long empty of candles, noticing that they too needed polishing, and set them down carefully again, making a mental note to tackle them before Madame's eagle eyes noticed and she earned herself a rebuke. She ran her cloth gently over the two porcelain figurines that Laure, Madame's sixteen-year old granddaughter,

had told her came from a shop in Paris, in France. First the painted heads, then the smooth, stiff folds of their skirts, and finally the bases. And that was when she saw it, lying face up, on the green cloth. A pale blue airmail letter. She stared at it, her eyes widening. She hesitated for a second, then picked it up, her heart beginning to beat faster. She looked around her then quickly slipped it into the front pocket of her apron. Madame wouldn't come downstairs again until five o'clock, when the sun had finally gone down. Laure would be in her favourite position: three branches above the ground in the jacaranda tree outside her bedroom window; she had to get it to her. Fast. Before Madame woke up.

She gave the cushions a quick beating, straightened the covers on the sofa and hurriedly swept the floor. She would wax and polish it later; right now there were more pressing issues to attend to. She quickly ran the duster along the top of the door and closed it, hurriedly stowing her bucket and mop in the cupboard next to the kitchen door. Then she bolted through the house before Cléones came through to inspect her work.

She darted out of the back door and ran into the garden, the letter creasing against her thighs as she ran. There would be hell to pay when Madame discovered the letter was gone but they'd cross that bridge later. They would have to make up some excuse as to how the letter had found its way into Laure's hands – never mind that it was *addressed* to her. *Laure St Lazâtre*. In Belle St Lazâtre's handwriting. Belle St Lazâtre. Laure's mother, who lived in Chicago. She ran towards the jacaranda tree, waving it in front of her. 'Lulu! Lulu! Look! Look what I found!'

Améline's whispered shout floated up through the leaves and brought Laure St Lazâtre's day-dream to an abrupt halt. She sighed. Such a *pleasant* dream, involving, as they usually did, her immediate departure from Haiti, suitcase in hand, walking across the tarmac to the enormous plane that would take her to Chicago and her mother and away from the stifling atmosphere

of her grandmother's house and the sticky afternoon heat that made her hair frizz and put a permanent shine on her nose. She peered down through the branches.

'What is it?' Améline was holding something up to her, waving it urgently. She looked more closely. It was a letter. Her heart started to beat faster. A letter? From Belle? She hardly dared look.

'I found it,' Améline whispered, thrusting the letter above her head. 'Just now. When I was cleaning the parlour. Here, take it. Quick! Before Cléones sees it.' She climbed nimbly on to the lowest branch and held it out. Laure reached down and grabbed it, her heart thudding. An airmail letter, of the pale blue sort that could only mean one thing. A letter from Belle. From *Maman*. She held it gingerly in her hands as though she couldn't quite believe it.

She looked down again but Améline was already gone, her slight, wiry figure weaving through the garden until she disappeared from view. She looked at the letter again. Yes, it was her mother's childish, looping scrawl; a Chicago postmark. She peered at the date: 3rd March, 1985. It had taken over two months to reach her. She stared at it again, then slid a trembling finger under the flap.