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A Private Affair

Written by Lesley Lokko

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A Private Affair

Lesley Lokko



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All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to
actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Every effort has been made to trace the source of the Boris Pasternak
quote used in these preliminary pages and the publisher will be very
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PART ONE

Prologue

Celle, Germany, 2009

It was snowing; flakes fell in light, feathery circles, whirling slowly through the air. She had forgotten to put on her gloves. She brought her hands up to try and protect her face but it was pointless. He brushed them aside as if they were nothing more than a distraction. He grabbed her hair, twisting her head around so that she was forced to look up at him. His pale blue eyes flickered over her face without expression. Nothing. She could feel herself saying something . . . a word or two, a plea . . . perhaps even in her own language, she couldn't tell. He took no notice. He slapped her lightly, almost teasingly and then he drew back his hand, correcting his aim. There was a moment's hesitation and then the weight of his fist made contact with her cheek. She felt the crack of her own jaw and then the sickening rush of inky black pain. She saw stars. Her mouth filled with blood. A second's pause, another awful wait, and then another punch, and another and another. Her mouth felt pulpy and warm. Suddenly there was ice on her teeth. It took her a moment to work out that the cold, sandy stuff in her mouth was grit, mixed with ice. She was on the ground. She was lying face down, brought there by the force of the blow. He was big, almost twice her size, and when he hauled her roughly to her feet again, she was as weightless as snow.

'Cunt.' The word hissed outwards, compressed between his lips and teeth. 'You fucking cunt.' He said it again and again, marking it with a blow, sometimes a kick. She could see his boots . . . polished black boots. She caught a glimpse of her own face reflected in the shine. She felt the steel cap prod her before he kicked her, hard and fast. The poker-hot stab of pain went all the way up to the roots of her hair. He bent down, his face very near to hers as he pulled her coat from her shoulders and tossed it to one side. She was already cold – colder than

she could ever have imagined but there was a chill on her bare skin that had nothing to do with the wind. He grabbed the material of her skirt, tearing it as he yanked it off her hips.

‘No . . . please, no.’

‘Cunt.’

‘No, no.’

‘Shut your fucking face.’ The exchange lasted less than a second. Another slap to the side of her face and then he was on top of her, smothering her with his bulk and weight. He wrapped one thick, meaty hand around her neck and pushed her knees apart. She’d never felt anything like it. He was splitting her in two. The pain was overwhelming. She could feel herself sliding in and out of consciousness as his hand closed around her throat, choking her, cutting off her breath. The growl that came out of his throat seemed to have come from something else . . . an animal, perhaps. Human beings didn’t make that sort of sound, she thought wildly to herself as she struggled desperately underneath him. Who could do this? No human being, surely. No one. Not even him.

She’d been with him once before – not like this, not out here in the open with the snow all around them and him tearing the clothes off her, choking her, but she’d known that first and only time that he was capable of anything. That was why she’d refused to go with him. ‘Let one of the other girls take him,’ she’d whispered to Birgit. ‘I don’t want to. I’m afraid of him.’ Birgit nodded; she was a good worker, a good earner . . . she rarely made a fuss. If she really didn’t want to go with him, she wouldn’t be made to. It was one of the unspoken rules at Judy’s, which was why she’d wound up staying there. It was safer there than anywhere else. Birgit had offered him someone else but he’d turned and walked out instead. They’d all breathed a sigh of relief as they watched him go. They were a strange bunch, those British soldiers, even though bars like Judy’s relied on them. No trouble, for the most part, but every once in a while an odd one would come along with an anger that was so raw and desperate and unknowable buried inside them that no number of visits could release. Those were the ones to watch out for. Awful things could happen; the girls sensed it somehow and if they were smart, they walked away, turned the job down. Judith knew it; she made sure the bookers knew it too. If a girl felt the fear – it came off some of them like a sweat – then she wouldn’t be made

to go back. But he'd come after her anyway. That was the other thing she'd seen in him that time. He wasn't the sort to take 'no' for an answer. She should have known.

1

SAM

Notting Hill, London, 2009

7.01 a.m. Sam Maitland opened one bleary eye and glanced across the room. In the dark her alarm clock glowed a luminous, digital blue.

7.02 a.m. In exactly three minutes she would push back her warm duvet and get out of bed. She closed her eyes, trying to claw back the last few minutes of her dream but it was gone. The clock slid soundlessly on. She burrowed her toes into the sheets . . . 7.04 a.m. One last, blissful minute and then it went off, signalling the end of sleep. She sighed and reluctantly swung her legs out of bed. She stumbled across the bedroom floor to the bathroom and switched on the light, catching sight of her reflection on the way to the shower. Tangled hair, smudged mascara, a crease across her left cheek . . . thank God it was Friday. She'd been out drinking with two of her colleagues the night before. Fortunately not a heavy session, just a couple of glasses of red wine (and a single shot of whisky and a mouthful of someone's tequila) to finish off an unusually long and hard week.

She opened the glass door to the shower and switched it on. Within seconds, the room was filled with steam. She gave herself up gratefully to the hot, pummelling jets of water. Ten minutes later, her thick, blonde hair washed and combed, she was finally awake. She wrapped herself in her white robe and walked into the living room. She flicked on the TV, listening with half an ear to the news as she made herself a bowl of cereal. Her mind was already skipping several hours ahead to the meeting that Peter Linman, her boss, had scheduled with a group of new clients – Americans, generally twice as demanding as everyone else with a keen eye for what they called 'the bottom line'. It was a line that always made her smile. She carried her cereal over to the couch and leaned across to her answering machine to play her messages.

'Hi, Sam. Peter here. Just a reminder that we're meeting Mark Silverman and his team at nine forty-five tomorrow, not ten. We'll

have a quick coffee in the boardroom on the eleventh floor before we go in. Hope the view'll soften them up. See you tomorrow.'

'Hey, Sam . . . it's me. Give me a ring back when you can. This week, preferably. Oh, it's my birthday on Friday. In case you'd forgotten.'

'Good afternoon, Miss Maitland. It's the concierge from Chepstow Road. You've got two packages . . .'

'Hi, Sam . . . it's me again. Call me tonight when you get in, will you? I've got something to tell you. Doesn't matter how late.' She smiled as she erased the messages. Two were from Paula – best friend, extraordinary jewellery-maker and the most scatter-brained, hopelessly disorganised and yet brilliant person she'd ever met. *No, I haven't forgotten your birthday*, she mouthed silently at the phone. As *if*. Paula rang every year to remind her and at thirty-eight, there'd been a fair few reminders. She finished her cereal and switched off the TV. It was 7.45 a.m. Time to get moving.

Fifteen minutes later, she was ready. She quickly checked her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail at the nape of her neck, held in place with a tortoiseshell comb. She was wearing her favourite black Armani suit with the knee-length skirt that flared just a little at the back and a fitted jacket. A stiff white shirt with a discreet ruffle at the collar, a thin gold chain and two large gold hoop earrings, killer heels (Blahnik, of course) and the heavy, antique gold ring she always wore on the third finger of her left hand – defiantly, her friends teased her – good to go.

She locked her front door and ran down the stairs. Her little silver sports car was parked outside. She pressed the alarm, opened the satisfyingly heavy door and slid inside. The smell of new leather never failed to thrill her. She loved her car. It had been a thirty-fifth birthday present to herself. A little expensive, granted, but definitely worth it. There was nothing quite like coming home in it after a long, tough day at work. She slung her briefcase onto the back seat, started the engine and pulled smartly into the thickening stream of traffic heading towards the Bayswater Road. Her offices were on North Row, just off Park Lane. On a good day, less than a five-minute drive. She really ought to walk to work or take the bus. But she'd worked so long and bloody hard to get to where she was that a short drive to and from the place she spent nearly every waking hour seemed a luxury definitely worth having.

‘Morning, Miss Maitland.’ Jim, the young, good-looking parking attendant turned up the full wattage of his smile as she opened her door. It was an open secret in the firm that his brightest, toothiest grins were reserved for her.

‘Thanks.’ She handed him the keys and quickly made her way to the lifts. She’d no desire to stop and flirt with Jim – or with anyone for that matter. Flirting made her uncomfortable. She’d never been any good at it, either. Too serious by half, according to most.

‘Morning, Sam. Peter’s already gone up.’ Claire, her PA, looked up as she walked into her office. She handed her a large mug of black coffee and a stack of files. ‘He said to let you know that Sue Walsh’ll be joining you shortly.’

Sam’s heart sank. Sue Walsh was the head of legal counsel in their New York office. Sue Walsh joining them could mean only one thing: the case would neither be as clear-cut or short as they’d all hoped. Well, everyone except Peter Linman, that was. He would be delighted. The longer the case, the more billable hours the firm could rack up. Having just spent the best part of the previous year on a similar case, Sam was praying for a quick end to this one. In three days’ time she was going on holiday – her first proper holiday in almost five years. Six days at a luxury spa just outside Marrakech and there was no way she was giving it up or even postponing it, Sue Walsh or no.

She made her way towards the lift, her coffee and the stack of files in hand, her mind already on the meeting ahead. She hadn’t had time to go through the files in as much detail as she normally did, or would have liked. From what she’d gathered, it seemed to be a pretty straightforward example of rights having been assigned to the wrong party – nothing unusual in that. The plaintiff – an English writer living in LA – had signed away an option on a screenplay at a ridiculously low rate. Now that the studio intended turning it into a film, they’d tried to muscle him off the job. It happened all the time. The firm Sam worked for – Bellitte, Hazelby, Forman, Lazards – were one of the top entertainment law firms in the world. If there was anyone who could sort out that sort of mess, it was them. She briefly wondered how an impoverished screenwriter could afford their legal fees but that was Peter’s problem, not hers. She gulped down another scalding mouthful of coffee and pressed the lift button.

‘See you later,’ Claire called out as the lift doors opened. ‘Don’t forget . . . you’ve got dinner with Soltermann and Jim Burns later on. I’ve booked The American Grill at the Savoy.’ She laughed at Sam’s expression. ‘Ah. I take it you forgot?’ Sam nodded frantically. ‘Don’t worry. I’ll nip out at lunchtime and get you a shirt. Pink?’ she hazarded a guess, looking down at Sam’s heels. Sam nodded again.

‘Thanks, Claire, you’re a star.’ Claire’s reply was lost as the doors closed and the lift moved smoothly upwards. Sam gulped down the rest of her coffee, made sure her hair was in place and turned her attention to the meeting ahead. If there was one thing Peter relied on her for, it was her ability to focus on the issues at hand. There were other lawyers in the firm who were either much quicker or able to think more laterally than her – but there were few with her diligence. She was rarely the one to put forward an argument that no one had thought of, or try an angle that others might view as risky – no, her skill lay in focusing on the details, seeing things that others in their haste might have forgotten. She was dogged and determined and there was little she missed. She’d been like that since school days – never the best or the brightest or even the one others thought most likely to succeed. That honour had always gone to her twin sister, Kate. Kate was quick off the mark, silver-tongued and flighty. Sam wasn’t. A slow burner, everyone said, although she herself had her doubts. She wasn’t one to burn full stop – *that* was the point. She was careful and considered and in her area of law those were the skills required. It was why she’d chosen it. She’d long ago come to the realisation that life was best lived according to one’s skills, not one’s weaknesses. It was the sole reason she’d been made a junior partner at BHFL ahead of her peers – she knew what she was good at and she stuck to it. In her teens, she’d tried desperately to be somebody she clearly wasn’t and although it had been twenty years since then, the memory of the pain it caused her still stung. She wouldn’t make *that* mistake again in a hurry. Once was quite enough, thank you very much.

‘Ah, Sam . . . lovely. Glad you could make it a little early. Sue, you remember Sam Maitland? She worked with us on the Napster case.’

‘Absolutely. Good to see you, Sam. Now, are we all here? Let me bring you up to speed . . .’

Sam quickly took her seat at the end of the table, pulled out her notebook and banished all thoughts of her unhappy teenage years *and* the thought of her upcoming holiday out of her mind.