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# **The Secrets Between Us**

Written by Louise Douglas

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# The Secrets Between Us

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For Chris, Nick and Mark,

with all my love

## CHAPTER ONE

I first met Alexander in the walled garden of the Hotel La Fiora in a secluded part of the southern coast of Sicily.

I was swimming in the pool and had been there for a while, half an hour maybe, long enough for the skin on the pads of my fingers to wrinkle. I floated on my back with my arms spread wide. From above I would have looked like a crucifix spinning slowly on the surface of the water. My eyes were closed against the needling brightness of the sun. It was the middle of August and the temperature was well over thirty degrees, and at that time of day, early afternoon, most Italian people were asleep indoors with the shutters pulled to. My sister, May, had gone to the room she shared with her husband, Neil, for a lie-down. She was much fairer than me and struggled in the heat. I was not sleepy. I preferred a swim to a nap and, anyway, I found it best to keep myself occupied, because in quiet moments my mind tended to drift back to Laurie standing at the doorway to our bedroom a week earlier, watching me

pack and begging me not to leave him. His hair stood on end. He was holding his glasses by one of the arms, waving them. He wore his faded-to-grey trousers and his feet were bare. My bag was on the bed and I was stuffing it with clothes. Behind me, Laurie had said: 'Sarah, this isn't helping. We need to talk about our problems. You can't just run away.'

I had replied quietly: 'Watch me.'

The most pressing of our problems, at least as I saw it, was that Laurie had slept with my friend Rosita in that very bed, our bed, not just once but several times. It wasn't the actual infidelity; it was the fact that Laurie had taken his lover, my friend, into our bed, our most private place, that disturbed me most. I don't think I'd have minded so much – at least it wouldn't have hurt so badly – if they'd simply rented an anonymous hotel room and fucked one another stupid there.

After they'd had sex, he must have lain on the bed and watched her dress, seen the private angles of her shoulder blades and elbows as she reached backwards to marry the hooks and eyes of her bra. Laurie was probably already beginning to feel guilty, because that was Laurie's way. Even so, he took trouble to cover his tracks. After Rosita left, he must have showered and made the bed; patted out the pillows; checked for any stray long dark hairs. He must have plumped the duvet, turned and straightened it, and, later, he let me sleep in the same place where Rosita had lain.

I could not forgive him that.

As I packed, Laurie had pleaded with me. He blamed his infidelity on me – no, not blamed exactly, but he

intimated that I had driven him to it. He was distraught, his face distorted with contradictions. 'You've been so distant lately,' he'd said. 'I didn't know how to reach you.' And I had replied: 'Believe me, Laurie, this wasn't the way.'

Rosita was a distraction, a salve, according to him – that was all. She was a symptom of the unhealthy condition of our relationship since we'd lost the baby. He always spoke in terms of 'we' and 'us' when talking about the stillbirth to show that he saw it as a mutual loss in which equal pain but no blame or responsibility was apportioned.

Sleeping with Rosita was stupid, he had said; it was nothing. It meant nothing. I didn't remember if I'd said anything out loud, but the words cannoning through my brain making my eyes hurt were: Oh but, Laurie, you did not change the sheets. You took her into the bed where our baby was conceived, that sacred place where we talked to him, and you measured his progress with the palm of your hand every night on my belly. You took her there, to our most private place, and then you let me sleep where she had lain. You betrayed us all. You lied, your body lied and you did not change the sheets.

In the swimming pool in the garden of the Hotel La Fiora, I paddled with my hands a little, to make myself rotate in the sunlight. I was heavy with my thoughts, weighed down by them. I floated but I felt as if I were made of lead.

It was hot and quiet in the hotel gardens. The blinding white concrete of the main building was staggered down the cliff-face so that every bedroom window

overlooked the bay. Dark-leaved citrus trees, palms and spiky plants in terracotta urns cast patterned shadows on the grass, and a sprinkler quietly and methodically watered the beds. People dozed on their loungers in the shade and a tiny grey kitten pounced on a spider on the footpath. Even the man who sat behind the bar in the kiosk by the pool was struggling to stay awake, his face cradled low in his hands, his upper eyelashes yearning to meet the lower ones. He flicked away an insect with the back of his hand; yawned. A motorbike drove by on the pot-holed road beyond.

Most of the hotel guests around the pool were resting on their sun beds with their eyes closed, or reading airport thrillers. They were older than me; middle-aged Italian and German holidaymakers with short, grey hair and sunglasses, wrinkled chests and hard, round bellies. I dipped underwater and swam a length, and at the far end of the pool I turned. Under the trees, a little boy was climbing out of his trousers, holding on to the side of the sun bed for balance. Beside him, a man in faded Hawaiian shorts and sunglasses was sitting hunched, elbows on splayed knees, blowing into an armband. I hadn't seen any children at the hotel before; it wasn't the kind of place for young families. None of the other guests seemed to have noticed him.

I slid beneath the water again and swam a few strokes. When I broke the surface, I wiped my eyes with my hands. There was a splash, and a rush of water, waves. I turned to see the same child doggy-paddling towards me with his chin held high, his upper body made buoyant by the inflated orange armbands. His



white-blond hair was cut very short, which made his eyes and ears seem very large and his face too small, and streaks of sun-protection cream on his nose and cheeks glistened in the sunlight. I headed for the steps at the far end. I did not want to share the pool with a child. The man was standing on the second step, hesitating. A phone was ringing, its tone piercing the somnolence of the afternoon. The sleepy people were disturbed. They raised their heads and pushed their sunglasses up their foreheads and frowned at the noise. The man glanced from the child to his phone on the lounge and back again. He caught my eye.

‘Would you watch him for a moment?’

I hesitated; I half-shrugged, half-nodded. What else could I have done? The man gave me the thumbs-up and stepped out of the pool, the wet hairs of his legs black and flat against the skin. I moved towards the child, who was concentrating on his swimming.

‘Hi,’ I said.

‘Hi.’ He looked as displeased by the supervisory arrangements as I was.

I struggled for a straightforward question, and eventually asked: ‘Who taught you to swim?’

‘I don’t need armbands,’ he replied. He had a slight lisp. His two top middle front teeth were missing.

‘Oh.’

‘Mummy said I didn’t need them but my dad makes me wear them.’

The boy looked towards his father, who was standing facing us but leaning into the telephone, listening earnestly.

'What's your name?' I asked the boy.

'Jamie.'

'That's a nice name. How old are you?'

The child looked at me. His eyes were the same blue colour as the tiny square ceramic tiles that lined the swimming pool. The irises were outlined in a darker colour and there were drops of water on his lashes. His face was delicate and small, babyish, but his expression was almost adult in its seriousness.

'Six and three quarters.'

'Oh,' I said. 'Good.'

I wondered if my son would have been anything like this boy if he had lived six and three quarter years. He'd have been darker in his colouring, certainly, and less intense. I always imagined a sunny, cherubic child when I thought of my boy as he might have been; bright-eyed with rosy cheeks and sticky fingers squirming solidly in my arms as I hugged and tickled him, demanding kisses.

No, he would not have resembled this child at all.

Jamie, pale and solemn, his legs pedalling beneath the ice-blue water, held my eyes. He said: 'Watch.'

He put his palms flat on the surface of the pool, dainty little fingers with seashell nails splayed, and moved them slowly as if he were playing the piano, or the guitar. On the floor, the sunlight was reflected in the patterns of the water Jamie choreographed above. It danced on the little tiles, rippled, shimmied and waltzed, and made flowers, spirals and circles. Jamie had turned the bottom of the pool into a kaleidoscope. I watched, as he had told me to, and after a few

moments he looked up at me, expectantly, and I realized he was waiting for praise.

'That's clever,' I said. 'Who showed you how to do that?'

'Mummy.'

'Where's Mummy now? Is she having a rest?'

Jamie shook his head. His eyes were glassy in the light and the pale, freckled skin on his cheeks and nose was slightly sunburned. He gave a little sigh as if he were tired of answering this question, tired of being asked.

'Mummy's gone,' he said, and from the way he said it I knew he did not mean 'to the shops' or 'for a lie-down'. He meant 'gone for good'.

## CHAPTER TWO

When his phone call was over, Jamie's father came into the pool. He walked down the steps and pushed off underwater, surfacing beside me. I studied him as if he were a figure in a painting. He had taken off his sunglasses and his eyes were deep set, brown, hidden behind his lashes as he squinted in the light. His hair was long; it reached his shoulders and was almost black. He had not shaved for a few days and his skin was a sallow colour, as if he were recovering from an illness. Something was not as it should have been. As he drew closer to me, I pulled away.

'Thanks,' he said.

'You're welcome.'

'Listen . . .' he said, and at exactly the same time I said: 'Anyway . . .' and we both smiled at our mutual clumsiness.

'I'm Alexander, Alex,' he said.

'Sarah.'

I didn't know what else to say and I had no

inclination to share the pool so I gave a little shrug and I said: 'I have to get out now.'

He said: 'OK.'

I was relieved he didn't try to engage me in conversation. I dreaded being asked friendly questions about myself, and having to lie because the truth would make the other person uncomfortable. Having so much to keep hidden made me feel ashamed; I was contaminated by my situation and I far preferred to be left alone.

I moved away towards the steps. Jamie and his father watched me. When I reached the end of the pool, Alexander sank down under the water.

I climbed out and went to stand on the wooden slatting beneath the pool-side shower. I arched back my neck to run the clean water through my hair and felt the sunshine warm on my face. Then I straightened again and opened my eyes and saw him watching. He gazed at me while Jamie splashed around him in the pool. Alexander's face was expressionless and composed. Flashes of light refracted from the water on his cheeks and chin. I paused, for a moment, with my hands in my hair, to watch him back, and he caught my eye and held it for a moment. Why was he staring? Could he tell something was wrong?

I broke the eye contact and turned away. I wrung the excess water from my hair and wrapped myself in the big yellow hotel towel that I'd left on the fence beside the shower, tucking it in at my chest, and then I picked up the purse that had been hidden beneath it and headed back across the lawn. The grass was prickly

against the soles of my feet. The mobile was ringing again on Alexander's sun bed. As I walked by, I could see the name of the caller illuminated in the window: Rowl. At the side of the lounge a small blue teddy bear lay face down in the grass. I leaned down to pick it up, and make it sit, propped against the pile of clothes, looking out over the swimming pool.

I asked the man in the kiosk for a glass of lemonade and drank it at a table in the shade. A little lizard ran up the wall beside me and stopped dead still at eye level. It was a pretty little thing, the pads of its toes like sequins pressed against the whitewash of the wall. I gazed through the hedging that bordered the sea edge of the garden at the blue, blue sky that canopied the bay and the hazy outline of the coast on the other side of the water. I tried to lose myself in the colours and the distance but was distracted by the movement in the pool, and by the sound of Jamie's father calling him out.

I passed them on the way back to my lounge. Alexander was rubbing the child's head with a towel; the boy was whining, complaining that his father was too rough. Jamie stood on one leg, scratching the back of his knee with his toes. He wrapped his skinny little arms about his chest, and shivered. Alexander had his sunglasses on again; I could not see his face, but his back was an arch of muscle and bone and the hair in the hollow of his arms was long and dark. A nasty scar, still gleaming slightly purple at its perimeter, dissected the place beneath his arm just under his lowest rib. The swimming shorts were stuck to his buttocks.

I kept my back to them while I wriggled my sundress over the top of my damp bikini and packed my stuff into my bag. I put on my sunglasses, stepped into my sandals and clipped across the paving stones set in the lawn back through the conservatory doors into the air-conditioned cool of the hotel.

I held my head high and did not look back.