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Opening Extract from...

Private Lives

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Prologue

She looked around the flat and smiled to herself. Silk drapes and tall windows looked out on to an iconic view: Tower Bridge and the slick black ribbon of the Thames glistening in the night. Sometimes she wanted to hug herself with excitement; just being here, in her own luxury flat, surrounded by all her nice things. Who'd have thought that someone like her would live in such a smart flat in the centre of one of the most exciting cities in the world?

Walking over to the kitchen, she poured herself another large glass of wine from the open bottle. Would he still come tonight? The thought of their last conversation jumped into her head, but she shook it away. No, of course he would come, he always did. She admired herself in the mirror: the long legs, the high breasts. Even in leggings and a tee-shirt she looked fantastic. No, he'd come. She knew he'd come.

She sank back into the sofa then flicked through her favourite celebrity magazine. In her more honest, intro-

spective moments she knew it was her obsession with magazines like this that had led her to choose this career path. Not that she could imagine Miss Davies, her careers adviser at school, calling what she did a 'career'. But what was wrong with wanting to be rich and famous? She bet Miss Davies didn't have a flat like this one.

Tossing the magazine to one side, she knew she should get ready in case he did drop by. A bottle of nail polish was on the coffee table and she held it up to the light. Scarlet. He always said he loved it when she painted her toenails red. *Slutty, that's what he meant*. Well, she was happy to oblige in that department, especially when they'd be making up tonight.

One toe nail had been painted when the doorbell rang. Flustered, she put down the polish and went to the door. She peered through the spy-hole, expecting to see flowers or some small, tastefully wrapped box clutched in his hand. But instead she saw another face. An unfamiliar man in a suit, his face stretched and bulbous in the fish-eye lens.

'Who is it?'

'It's Jack. Jack Devon. I'm a friend of Peter's.'

She frowned. Who was he? Had Peter sent him? Attaching the chain, she opened the door and looked through the gap. The man was about forty. Smartly, but conservatively dressed, like an accountant. Pale watery eyes blinked behind small, rimless glasses.

'What do you want?' She hadn't meant to sound rude, but it was past nine o'clock and she wasn't used to having strange men turning up at her door, no matter what other people might say about her.

‘It’s about Peter.’ He glanced behind himself. ‘Do you think we could talk inside?’

She felt a jolt of panic. Was he hurt? Was something wrong?

‘Is he okay?’ she asked.

‘Under the circumstances,’ replied the man.

‘What circumstances?’

‘I think it’s best if we discuss this inside.’

She wavered for a moment, then slid back the chain and opened the door. He walked inside, looking nervous, uncomfortable.

‘I’m sorry to have to visit you so late,’ he began. ‘I don’t enjoy this any more than you do.’

‘Who are you?’ she asked, folding her arms across her chest. ‘What do you want?’

The man shrugged as they moved into the open-plan living space. ‘It’s not what I want. It’s what Peter wants.’

She didn’t like the direction this conversation was taking. ‘And what’s that exactly?’

He pushed up his glasses and rubbed his eyes. ‘He wants you to start acting reasonably.’

Her heart was beginning to hammer in panic, but she was determined not to show it. ‘So who are you? His lawyer?’

‘No, not exactly,’ he said. ‘But that might be next. Blackmail is a criminal offence, after all.’

‘Blackmail?’ She almost laughed. ‘Is that what this is about?’

Okay, so she had applied a bit of pressure, told him she wasn’t prepared to wait any longer, maybe said a few things she shouldn’t. But that was hardly blackmail, was it?

'Does Peter know you're here?'

'Of course. He simply wants a solution that works for both sides. We really don't want to have to involve the police.'

She snorted nervously. 'You and I both know that Peter is not going to go to the police.'

The man blinked at her, then nodded. 'Indeed. Which is why I'm here.'

He moved over to the table and opened his leather briefcase. He pulled out a cheque book and held it up. 'How much?' he asked.

She glanced at the cheque book, then looked out of the window. 'I don't want his money,' she said.

The man allowed himself a small smile. 'Really. And who paid for all this?' He glanced pointedly around the apartment.

'I don't want *money*,' she snapped, trying her best to sound indignant. 'What I want is Peter.'

'Well, I'm afraid that's not an option any more,' he said flatly.

'We'll see about that.' She strode to the coffee table and snatched up her mobile. 'I'm phoning him.'

He shook his head, that half-smile again. The bastard was enjoying this.

'I don't think so.' He peered at his watch. 'It's two a.m. in Uzbekistan.'

'Uzbekistan? He's supposed to be here.'

'Just us here,' said Devon, gesturing with the cheque book again. This time, her eyes followed the book, unable to look away.

'So give me a figure,' he said, sitting at the table.

She grabbed her glass of wine and took a fortifying sip.

'I've told you, this isn't about money. This is about Peter and me.'

'How much is it going to take?' he asked, taking a fountain pen from his inside pocket.

'And how much would you suggest, Mr Devon? How much would you say a relationship is worth?'

'In this case, nothing, because your relationship is over.'

His words were simple and stinging, their impact cruel because she knew they were true. She had pushed Peter too far, overplayed her hand. And now he had sent a lackey to mop up his mess. A thickness filled her throat and her vision blurred in a cloud of tears.

'I think you'd better leave.'

Devon remained seated. 'Believe it or not, I'm here to help you.'

She hated the note of sympathy, the pity she could hear in his voice.

'Take my advice,' he said slowly. 'Accept the money, move somewhere new, forget what's happened and just get on with your life. It's the smart thing to do.'

'It's never that easy though, is it?' she said, her voice cracking. 'Not when you love someone. Now please, just go.'

Devon hesitated, then put his cheque book back in his briefcase and stood up. 'Very well,' he said. 'Could I just use the bathroom?'

She nodded without looking at him. 'Upstairs.'

Her bedroom was on a mezzanine platform over the living space below. She watched him disappear towards her en-suite, his sensible brown shoes clumping up the glass staircase.

His briefcase was still on the table. How much would

he have paid? A decent amount, that was for sure. And Devon was right, it was the smart thing to do. Her own money wouldn't last long in this place. A person could quickly get used to expensive linens, parquet floors and stainless steel kitchens. Nice things. Pretty things. Things which made her feel safe, secure, smart, successful. This was the life she'd always wanted. But still . . . for once, she had been telling the truth. It wasn't about the money this time. All she wanted was him – and she couldn't have him. No amount of lovely sheets would make up for that.

She rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands to stop the flow of tears. Taking a few deep breaths, she tried to compose herself. Maybe she would call Peter herself, apologise for what she'd said, explain that he'd taken it all the wrong way. Yes, that would do it, she thought, feeling a little better. Maybe this was a test; when Mr Devon reported back that she had turned down the money, he would see that she truly loved him, not his credit cards.

She glanced up the stairs, frowning. He'd been a long time in the bathroom.

'Mr Devon?' she called. 'Is everything alright up there?'

There was no reply. Shrugging, she walked up the stairs towards the mezzanine platform. 'Mr Devon?'

At the top, she tapped on the bathroom door but couldn't hear a sound inside. 'Are you alright? Mr D—'

The door opened and Jack Devon stepped out. 'Yes. I'm fine.'

'Oh, good,' she stuttered, flushing with embarrassment as she turned to walk back downstairs. Her body jerked forward as she felt a hard push from behind. Instinctively she reached for the banister, but she was moving too fast and momentum carried her forward, her head slamming

against the wall. Her body twisted as she fell, her shoulder cracking into the glass steps, her torso pin-wheeling over, snapping her neck, her body landing splayed and broken like a puppet with the strings cut. It had been mercifully quick. Aside from one moment of air-sucking terror as her hand missed the rail, she had felt nothing.

She lay there staring up, her body motionless except for the faint flutter of her eyelids, barely aware as Jack Devon walked slowly down, taking a pair of latex gloves from his pocket to finish the job. When he was done, he moved methodically around the house, making sure everything was in place for whoever found her. Sometimes he had to create a story: the lovelorn jilted lover who had taken their own life, the break-in gone wrong, but here she had done the job for him. The half-empty bottle of wine. A simple case of a tragic accident, slipping on the steps after too much alcohol.

Satisfied with his work, he pulled out his phone and made the call. 'It's done,' he said simply, then hung up. Removing his glasses and putting them in his pocket, he picked up his briefcase and let himself out. Out of her flat, on to the street, as if he'd never been there.

1

Six months later

As the man in the white leotard dangled from the trapeze and poured Krug into the top saucer of the champagne fountain, Anna Kennedy realised she had never seen a party quite like this. Not in the movies or in the pages of Hello magazine; She certainly never been to anything this grand, this so spectacularly over the top she didn't know whether to get drunk and enjoy it or just stand there and watch it like she would a Tim Burton movie or the Cirque du Soleil.

She took a gold macaroon from a waiter on stilts and popped it in her mouth.

A little celebratory soiree, that was how her friend, the Russian businesswoman Ilina Cyzin had described the party to her.

'Just a few close friends, nothing too extravagant.'

Ilina's definition of 'extravagant' was certainly different from most people's – no surprise if her collection of 'close friends' was anything to go by. Her Holland Park home was packed with the great and the good: royals, billion-

aires, celebrities, at least one hundred milling around the house and manicured gardens in couture and diamonds.

If I threw a party at three days notice I'd be lucky to get my best mate and a groceries delivery from Ocado, thought Anna smiling to herself.

Not that any of this should have surprised her. Ilina, recently described by Forbes magazine as one of the world's wealthiest self-made women, had always been one of her more colourful clients. As an associate in the media department at London law firm Davidson Lewis, Anna had spent the last twelve months advising Ilina as she set about suing British tabloid The Globe for a libelous story they had printed about her financial affairs. They settled the case earlier in the week, when the Davidson Lewis team had make it clear that Ilina was prepared to take it all the way to the High Court trial. It wasn't as if Ilina couldn't afford to celebrate.

Across the pool someone waved at her. Anna hesitantly waved back although she didn't recognise the handsome man in the navy suit. Was he a client? Or another lawyer perhaps? Maybe he was even calling her over for a drink. She was wearing her best black trouser suit after all, Italian, expensive, more expensive than she could afford.

The man turned as one of the butlers walked past, taking a glass of champagne from the tray.

Of course. She thought sheepishly. *He thinks I'm a waitress.*

She slipped off her jacket and letting her dark hair down from her businesslike pony tail. *Better,* she thought, checking her reflection in a mirrored water-feature, although she accepted that she was never going to compete was the exotic creatures that drifted past her. At a

party like this she was invisible. Not that that was a particularly bad thing: it meant she could have the mother of all people-watching sessions: the married celebrity necking with the model who was most certainly not his wife or the high-profile Lord who appeared to be preparing to snort a large amount of powder from a marble mantlepiece.

'I assume that's snuff,' she smiled reminding herself that it was her job to be discreet.

Her mobile began ringing angrily in her bag. Reluctantly putting her flute of bubbly down, she scrabbled the phone out. *Dammit, work,* she thought, peering at the screen. *Wasn't it always?*

'Anna? Where the hell are you?'

It was Stuart Masters, the head of the media department at her firm.

'I'm at Ilina Cyzin's celebration party,' said Anna, raising her voice to be heard over the banging music.

'What? At this time?'

She glanced at her watch. It was just ten o'clock. For a moment, she imagined Stuart and his uptight wife Cynthia sitting in their perfectly ironed dressing gowns playing Scrabble.

'Well go and find Nick Kimble. We need to get an injunction. Right now.'

There was no point complaining. It was a Friday night, the run-up to the weekend newspapers, and as an associate who specialize in short-notice injunction work, that meant being on red-alert.

Stuart filled her in on the pertinent details. Hanging up, she looked urgently for Nick Kimble, her supervising partner at the firm. They'd arrived together straight from

work, but Nick had abandoned her within five minutes saying he had to 'go mingle'. Had to go and see if he could sleaze up some poor model, more like, thought Anna. Sure enough, she spotted him at the bar, leaning over a girl young enough to be his daughter. He didn't look pleased to see his colleague.

'Sorry Nick,' she said as she took his elbow. 'We need to talk. I've just had a phone call from Stuart.

Nick rolled his eyes. 'Who's in trouble this time?'

'Wayne Hardy again.'

'You mean happily married role-model-to-the-kids footballer Wayne Hardy?' he said sarcastically. 'Let me guess, he's had another one of his moral slips?'

She nodded. His people want to meet tonight. The News of the World are going to run the story on Sunday if we don't injunct it.'

'I think you should deal with this one.' He said slugging back his whiskey. 'Call counsel. Find a judge tomorrow morning.'

'Nick, a partner should deal with this one. Wayne's club is an important client.'

It was typical of Nick to try and weasel out of it, especially now he was at one of the primo parties of the season, surrounded by beautiful women.

He clapped her on the shoulder a little too hard.

'Anna my love, sometimes you need to step up to the plate. Think of this as your big break.'

'Nick, it's my dad's birthday tomorrow. I have to be in Dorset.'

'Tell you what,' said Nick with a patronising smile. 'You speak to the clients tonight. Get the injunction

tomorrow. Let the media know they're gagged and I'll take it from there.'

Oh right, you'll take over when all the hard work is done and you've slept off your hangover? she thought. Not for the first time, Anna bit her tongue and reminded herself that all she had to do was stick this out for another twelve months and she'd make partner. Then she wouldn't have to do Nick Kimble's dirty work ever again.

Her boss touched her on the forearm. 'Before you go, can you just pop to the bar and get me a drink? Champers. The good stuff so I can mingle. Branson must be in here somewhere. I wouldn't mind a slice of his corporate work.'

The crowd parted as Ilina approached them, shimmering across the floor like an exotic mermaid. 'Nick. Anna,' purred Ilina, taking them both by the arm. 'So lovely to see you both.'

'Ilina, your house is amazing,' said Anna truthfully. It was a perfect detached Georgian property in a prime location which had been extended and modernised with taste and elegance. Anna shuddered to think how much it would cost to buy.

'You are so sweet. Thank you.'

Nick shrugged dismissively. 'My wife and I looked at a property not dissimilar to this last year,' he said.

'Then I think I must be paying you too much,' said Ilina with mock-severity.

Anna couldn't resist a smile as Nick furiously tried to back-pedal.

'Of course, it would have been a stretch,' spluttered Nick. 'I wouldn't want to suggest that our fees are

overly . . . that is to say, we try to price our services on a par with the . . .'

Ilina touched his arm, stopping him mid-flow.

'Did I hear you say you were going to the bar?' she said. 'I'd love a cocktail.

'Of course, of course,' he said, backing away, almost bowing as he went.

Ilina laughed as the watched him scuttle off in the direction of the bar. '*Идиот*', she cursed in Russian.

'You're going to have to translate that,' smiled Anna.

'Idiot'. Or perhaps 'wanker'.'

'He does have his moments,' said Anna tactfully.

'Moments?' said Ilina. 'He has spent the whole night boasting about his brilliant victory with my case. The only time I hear from him is when he sends me bills.'

Anna had grown close to Ilina over the past few months, but even so knew it was unprofessional of her to comment – even if it was true. Officially Nick was her supervising partner, but he seemed to spend all his time on the golf course, leaving Anna to handle her own caseload. In Ilina's case, however, she had been glad to be in sole charge. In the society columns, the Russian came across as frivolous and silly – an oligarchess who looked like Miss Ukraine and who could drop a million pounds on a shopping trip before lunchtime.

Few people knew that under the jewels, she was a Harvard graduate who had used her father's Kremlin connections and sharp intellect to succeed in the macho and ruthless world of oil and gas. There was nothing silly about Ilina Cyzin. Nothing silly at all.

'Ilina I'm afraid I have to go,' said Anna. 'I have to meet a client but thanks so much for inviting me.'

‘Darling, just stay for a few minutes longer. I have prepared a little speech and we have a cake.’

Anna had seen the cake; a confectionary mountain would be a better description. With five tiers and a spun-sugar caricature of Ilina standing on top of a copy of the Globe, it put every wedding cake Anna had ever seen in the shade.

Ilina tossed her long blonde hair over her shoulder and mounted a podium by the infinity pool.

‘Darlings,’ she began, ‘Thank you for joining me for my victory parade.’

She was an impressive public speaker, delivering her lines with confidence, wit and verve and she had the assembled captains of industry in the palm of her hand. In fact, Anna was so busy watching the crowd that it took a moment before she realised that two hundred heads were turning to look at her.

‘Anna Kennedy has been my rock in my time of need,’ Ilina was saying. ‘Her expert legal guidance has been second to none and I would recommend her services should any of you make the mistake of attracting the attentions of the gentlemen of the press.’

There was much laughter at this: there was barely a person in the room who wasn’t regularly in the papers, whether in the gossip columns or political pages.

‘Please join me in toasting my saviour,’ said Ilina raising her glass towards Anna.

She willed the ground to swallow her whole, whilst trying her best to force a smile onto her face. Across the pool she could see Nick Kimble glaring at her, which was a small consolation, and she took it as her cue to leave, heading for the door via the cloakroom.