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Saffron Skies

Lesley Lokko

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Prologue

London, England 1974

Amber Sall squeezed herself into as little a ball as she could possibly manage, which, despite her height, was surprisingly small. She lay huddled in the space at the back of the downstairs shoe cupboard, trying to fit into the place where the vacuum cleaner usually went. The space was deep and dark, buffered from the outside world by the thick bank of winter coats and scarves that hung along the wall. It was the only place in the house where she couldn't hear the fighting. She could just about bear the shouting, Max's voice getting progressively louder, but she couldn't stand the crying. When her mother started crying, softly at first, then harder – huge, gasping sobs that tore through every room in the house – that was her signal to run from wherever she was to the cupboard. There, and only there, where the noise was muffled, would her heartbeat slowly return to normal and the panic in her chest subside. It was quiet inside, a thick, comforting kind of silence. She wrapped one end of a scarf around her face and began counting the minutes, hoping the fight wouldn't last too long. One, two, three . . . she'd reached nine when she heard a door slam followed by the sound of feet pounding heavily on the stairs. The front door banged shut loudly, panes of glass rattling against the frame. She held her breath, but there was nothing further. She sat very still for a few minutes, waiting to see if anything else would happen. Everything was quiet. Then she heard Max's car starting. The engine revved once, twice . . . and then he was gone. She breathed out in relief, pushed her way out of the cupboard and ran straight upstairs.

Her mother lay draped dramatically over the silk divan in the drawing room on the first floor. She turned a tear-stained face towards Amber as she burst into the room.

'Darling,' she said thickly, 'Max's gone.'

'Yes, I know. It's only Monday,' Amber said briskly. 'He'll be back later, I expect. D'you want anything?'

'Just a hug. Give me a hug,' her mother said, wiping back tears. 'Come here, darling.'

'No,' Amber said firmly, eyeing the mascara running down her mother's cheeks. 'You'll make my face dirty. I'll send Krystyna up.' She turned to go.

'Will you ask her to bring me some . . . tea?' her mother called after her.

Amber rolled her eyes. Tea? Brandy, more likely. She ran back down the stairs.

She found Krystyna, their affable Polish helper, in the kitchen, already preparing a tray for a routine that was pretty well rehearsed. Krystyna gave her a smile and a hug before disappearing upstairs with the tray and on it, a small silver flask. Amber grabbed her coat from the cupboard, picked up her homework and ran out of the house, slamming the front door behind her. She ran across the street, up the steps to Becky's front door and rang the bell impatiently. She wanted to be as far away as possible from the tensions at home.

Becky's mother opened the door and surveyed the ten-year-old girl standing on the doorstep, the scowl on her usually pretty face saying it all. She sighed. As exciting as it was to have the millionaire Max Sall living across the road from them, she did feel sorry for his children, especially Amber. Having Max for a father was difficult enough, what with his bizarre domestic arrangements – a wife and family in London *and* his mistress and daughter in Rome – but to have been saddled with an alcoholic, empty-headed mother like Angela . . . no wonder the poor child looked so miserable.

'Becky's upstairs, dear,' she said, resisting the urge to hug Amber as she slipped past. She watched the girl run up the stairs two at a time. She hadn't said a word. Anyway, she thought to herself as she heard Becky's bedroom door slam shut, Amber wasn't really the kind of girl you hugged – even at ten, she was already far too self-contained, somehow, for that. She didn't need anyone's sympathy, she seemed to be saying, she could cope with things on her own, thank you very much. How different from Becky, her own daughter, Susan Aldridge often thought. The two of them had been best friends since kindergarten, more like sisters, really, but they were so, *so* different. Amber was a leader, a strong-willed, often bossy little girl, practical and serious to a fault. Becky was a dreamer, her head always in the clouds, a follower, always eager and easy to please. Susan supposed that was why it worked – opposites attracting, and all that. She closed the front door and walked down the corridor to the kitchen, wondering what to make for supper. Becky, she was sure, would eat everything that was put in front of her. It was Amber who was picky, with a list of *don't-likes* as long as her arm.

Upstairs, in the serene safety of Becky's room, Amber began to calm down. She hadn't said anything as she came through the door but at the sight of Becky's familiar belongings – books, dolls, scrapbooks, tapes, rolls of paper and hundreds of coloured pencils, she slowly began to unwind. Becky didn't say anything either, just pulled out her shoebox of pencils and scraps

of paper and pushed a pile across the floor. She calmly began preparations for their favourite game: paper dolls. Amber picked out a few pencils, half-heartedly joining in. In truth, it was really Becky's favourite game – she was so good at drawing, making up outfits and accessories . . . half the time Amber just sat beside her in silence, watching, awed by Becky's skill in dreaming up colours and patterns and turning flat, empty sheets of paper into a thousand outfits for both their dolls, none of them even remotely similar. She didn't know how she did it.

She watched Becky take a pair of scissors from the shoebox and begin to cut out a pair of dark grey trousers she'd just drawn. She liked the way Becky's long, auburn hair swung gently as she worked, concentrating on following the lines *perfectly*, not allowing the scissors to slip. Everything Becky did was neat and precise. Amber, whose own paper dolls looked as though they'd been torn, not cut, from the pages of the sketchbook, was envious. She looked around her. She loved Becky's room. It was full of the things Becky liked – drawings, little ceramic pots of pencils and paintbrushes, Becky's favourite pictures on the walls, clothes in wicker baskets, a coat stand full of her winter hats and her collection of ballet shoes . . . it wasn't messy, as such, it was just full. Full of life. It was so different from Amber's empty room. At home, a maid came in twice a day; once just after she'd left for school and again just after dinner, to put things away, tidy her drawers and make her bed. It was like living in a hotel, Amber complained to Krystyna. But Max's instructions to the staff were clear: keep the place clean and tidy. Amber knew it had something to do with the time he'd come back from a month-long business trip and found that she and Kieran hadn't had a bath in a week. It was a bet between them, the then eight-year-old Kieran tried to explain, to see how long they would go without . . . but Max was furious. After that, an army of staff descended on the house each day, cleaning, dusting and organising things, keeping everything in the kind of order Max wanted and liked. Max, Max, Max. It was all about Max. Neither she nor Kieran ever called him 'Daddy' – she didn't know why exactly. It would have sounded . . . silly. He was Max. Just as Angela was Angela, not 'Mummy'. Angela certainly never behaved like a mother. Mothers were soft, comforting women like Becky's mum, not the brittle, drunk and fragile creature they all knew Angela to be.

She looked at Becky's hand slowly begin to bring to life the clothes she was colouring in. A brightly patterned skirt; a flamboyant scarf . . . a tiny pair of high-heeled shoes. She sighed. She longed to be good at something, *any*thing. She liked the way everyone talked about Becky – *so good at art!* – but no one ever said anything about her. Other than how sensible she was – and how well she coped. Well, she was tired of *coping*. She didn't even know what it meant.

1

London, England 1978

Amber woke early, dragged out of sleep by the fierce, leaden concentration of pain in her lower belly and the sound of voices downstairs. She lay very still, alternately being thrust above and below the threshold of the wringing, wavering pain. It was her first period. She knew what to expect – Becky's mother had told them both everything they needed to know – although she hadn't said much about it hurting so. But the pain in her stomach was nothing compared to the dread that crept through her as she heard Max's voice. *The last bloody straw.* She slid out of bed and crept into her bathroom. She washed herself quickly, found the packet of bulky sanitary napkins Mrs Aldridge had given her, and put on a clean pair of pyjamas. She was just about to climb back into bed when she heard a shout from downstairs, followed by the sound of glass breaking. Angela must have thrown something at Max. Or vice versa. There was another shout, then the sound of something being dragged across the floor. She heard her brother's door open on the other side of the hallway. She got out of bed again and opened her own door, her heart thumping.

'What's going on?' Kieran asked, looking at her with worried eyes.

'I don't know,' Amber whispered, peering over the balustrade. 'I just woke up.'

'I thought he was supposed to be in Rome. With bloody Francesca,' Kieran muttered.

'He came back last night,' Amber said. 'Angela wasn't expecting him, I don't think . . . she's been at it since yesterday.' She looked at Kieran. His face was tight. He hated seeing Angela upset or hearing the two of them fight. She sighed and looked away. Although Kieran was two years her senior, to Amber, it often felt the other way round. She was the one who had to comfort him when the fights got out of hand. His face would close up at the sight of Angela, bruised and hung-over, pretending nothing had happened, that it was all completely, astoundingly normal – and then, Amber knew, it would take days to coax him out of his furious, dark mood.

There was a final slam of the door, the sound of a key being turned in a lock and then, mercifully, all was quiet. Kieran turned and quickly walked back to his own room. Amber watched him fumbling in his dressing gown for the packet of cigarettes he always kept in his pocket. She stood at the

top of the stairs, a tight, cold feeling of fear creeping slowly through her veins. Something was going to happen; she could feel it just as she could feel the sharp, stinging cramps in her abdomen signalling another, different kind of change.

The next morning the house was unusually quiet. Krystyna didn't come to wake her. Amber stumbled out of bed, late for school. She pulled on her school clothes and ran downstairs. Angela was nowhere to be seen. Kieran had already left for school. She walked into the breakfast room apprehensively. Max was sitting at the table in his dressing gown, calmly reading the papers, as if nothing had happened. She slid into the seat next to him, careful not to disturb him. 'Where's Angela?' she asked, as casually as she could manage, pouring milk over her cereal.

'Your mother needs a little rest,' Max said, putting down the paper and looking at her. Amber swallowed nervously.

'Is she in bed?'

'Yes, for the moment. But she's going to go away for a bit, later on today.'

'Away? Where?'

'Somewhere quiet,' Max was looking at her closely. Amber blushed under his scrutiny. 'And that's what I want to talk to you about.'

'Are you going to live here now? Always?' The words were out before she could stop them.

'No, not quite.' He smiled at her. And then dropped the bombshell. 'I'm sending you to Rome for a few weeks. I'm too busy to be here all the time. Kieran can stay here on his own but you're still too young. I'll arrange for you to have private lessons; it's nearly the end of the school year, anyway. Francesca and Paola will look after you.' He turned back to his paper.

Amber's heart fell straight through her stomach. She looked at him in horror. She tried to say something, but the words wouldn't come out. *No!* she wanted to scream. *I'm not going, you can't make me!* A few *weeks?* With Francesca? And *Paola*? Her half-sister whom she hated more than anything or anyone in the world? She couldn't imagine spending an hour with Paola, let alone a few weeks. She sat in silence beside him, struggling with herself to speak. *No, I won't!* But you didn't say 'no' to Max. You couldn't. Amber knew the rules. She bent her head, blinked back her tears and shoved a spoonful of cornflakes in her mouth. She'd known something terrible was going to happen. It wasn't Angela being sent away, it was her, being sent to Rome. Being sent to Francesca. And Paola. Sick with repressed rage, she scraped back her chair, mumbled goodbye to Max and ran to her room before Max could say anything more. Or worse.

Max barely looked up as Amber rushed out of the room. Despite his

outward calm, he was fuming. He was furious with Angela. She'd done it again – he was about to leave for Eastern Europe to nurse one of his biggest deals to date through the delicate negotiation processes. He needed a clear head, free from the clutter and messy tangle of emotions that always seemed to surround his wife. He needed peace and quiet, not *this* . . . the ongoing, boringly predictable drama in which she played the leading, neurotic role. He just couldn't understand it – he'd given her everything; she lacked for nothing. A beautiful home, plenty of money, two healthy children . . . anything and everything a woman could ask for – what the hell more did she want? He pushed his plate away from him, too angry to eat. He looked around the room at the elegant furnishings, the exquisite paintings on the wall, the fine bone china on which his congealing eggs and bacon sat, untouched. Yes, she had everything. It had been a long, hard slog to reach this point and now she wanted to throw it all away? For the price of a bottle of whisky? Max shook his head. It was beyond him. His gaze turned slowly away from the polished surface of the dining table and the artfully arranged flowers around him. The anger that had risen in him so suddenly dissipated, leaving him with an unfamiliar, inexplicable sadness. He pushed his chair back from the table and walked out of the breakfast room and upstairs to his study, his tread a little heavier than normal. He stood in the doorway for a moment, looking at his possessions spread around the room. His books; his favourite pieces of art and sculpture; the beautiful desk Angela had bought for him, years before . . . he walked over to it and sat down. He pulled open the drawer to his left. Inside, nestled in a bed of white tissue, was his most treasured possession: a dog-eared, battered-beyond-repair teddy bear. He stared at it, rapidly losing himself in the mists of time and memory. Within seconds, it seemed, he was back where he'd started, where everything had begun.

It was cold that morning in September, 1939. The kind of cold that crept in under your clothes, surprising you with its dampness, signalling the end of summer. Nine-year-old Markus Salzman wasn't thinking about the cold, however – there were other, much more pressing concerns to worry about. His mother had been crying for days and no one would explain why. His father had disappeared the previous week and then suddenly returned the night before, looking ten years older. Markus was an only child: there was no one to share his worries with. Lotte, the housekeeper to whom he usually turned when Mutti was upset, or away, wasn't saying anything. She pursed her lips in that awful way she had and, apart from urgent, whispered conversations in the corridors with the kitchen staff or Joachim, his father's valet, said nothing. Nothing. It was left to him to try to figure out what was going on. Apart from the war, of course, that everyone said was coming –

only a matter of days, that was what he'd heard sitting crouched down behind the closed drawing-room door the night before when his father came back, unannounced. His uncles were in the room, and their neighbour, the kindly Herr Finkelstein. He'd only caught snatches of a conversation he couldn't understand – *Kindertransport, England, Kulturgemeinde* – and he frowned, trying to make sense of it all. But before he could put any of the pieces together or at least remember enough of what he'd heard to run upstairs to his mother and demand to know what was going on, Lotte had found him and ordered him to bed.

So here he was on a cold September morning, struggling to pull on a pair of prickly woollen undergarments and wondering why he'd been summoned to the drawing room and told to dress warmly. He soon found out.

Mutti couldn't – or wouldn't – look at him. His father stood stiffly by the elegant drawing-room windows, gazing down at something unseen in the street below them. His favourite aunt, Berthilde, was crying softly in a corner of the room. Markus looked at them all, too astonished to speak. Go away? To England? By himself? He blurted something out – *Aren't you coming? What about you? And Mutti?* – to which his father turned from the window and replied in a voice that even Markus could tell was forced and unnaturally cheerful. *We'll follow you. Soon.* It was, of course, a lie.

Everything had been arranged at the last minute. Harald Salzman, through the unexpected kindness of a German client, had managed to secure a place for his only son on one of the last *Kindertransport* trains leaving Germany, bound for Holland and then Harwich. Markus Salzman, aged nine, arrived in Harwich on 6 September, three days after the war had broken out. He remembered little of the goodbyes at the station – huddled in a carriage with 200 other crying, terrified children, the large windows of the German train pulled down all the way to allow the sobbing parents one last, lingering glimpse of their children before the train began its slow exit from the station. Germany, troops massing in the autumnal landscape, Holland, the port, the crossing . . . these passed before his unseeing eyes, making little lasting impression. He stepped off the boat in Harwich on an uncharacteristically bright and sunny day and discovered immediately that his understanding of the world, such as he'd experienced it to be, was of no use to him whatsoever in this new, unfamiliar place. He couldn't speak a word of the language around him. The one person he'd befriended on the journey across the Channel had disappeared almost as soon as they arrived. Markus saw him being led away from the train by an elderly couple – obviously delighted to see him – and that was that. He was utterly alone. He held in one hand a small leather case that his mother had hurriedly prepared for him and in the other, Solly, his little dog-eared teddy bear that

Aunt Berthilde had pushed through the windows at him as the train pulled away. He had no money, no address to go to, no names of people to look for, just a tiny folded-up piece of paper that Mutti had told him to hang onto, at all costs . . . and his bag. And Solly. *There just wasn't enough time*, his father shouted desperately to him, his voice whipped away on the wind and drowned by the sound of the departure whistle. *We couldn't arrange anything . . . not enough time . . .* it was the last time he heard or saw his parents.

He chose to forget. Six years at the Neasden Lane Orphanage in North London living in conditions he had only ever read about back home in Dresden. From his wealthy, cultured background where he had everything he wanted, whenever he wanted, he fell. He learned what it was like to live with hunger, a dull gnawing ache in the pit of his stomach that never went away, no matter how much food he and some of the other orphans managed to steal from the kitchens late at night; to live with cold, even in the summer; to close himself off from everyone around him, and to forget everything about who he had been. Before. He learned English quickly and well, determined to rub out all traces of foreignness in his voice and manner. He was tall and handsome, charming when he wanted to be, arrogant and difficult when he didn't. He was quick-witted and sharp, despite the rupture in his schooling and the uncertainties of his new life. He became Max Sall and buried Markus Salzman. By the time he was nearly sixteen, the war had been over for a year and Max knew it was time to move on. He left the orphanage on a damp, rainy Monday morning with the same small leather case, a letter of recommendation to Sainsbury's from one of the superintendents, the folded piece of paper containing the three uncut diamonds his mother had given him and Solly, squashed somewhere between his one pair of decent trousers and two pairs of socks.

His first job was mopping up the floor in the butchery section at the Sainsbury's in Kentish Town. It was dirty, tiring work but Max couldn't have cared less. Anything was better than 24 Neasden Lane. He found lodgings on Baird Street in Camden Town; a single, narrow attic room with a shared bathroom on the landing below. Mrs Mortimer, the overweight, overripe landlady took a shine to him, bringing him leftovers from the family meal downstairs when he appeared late at night; washing and ironing his one good shirt and even making breakfast for him on a Sunday, when the rest of her brood were out at church. Max was no fool. He lost his virginity to her one winter evening as Arthur, her ox of a husband, was listening to the wireless and the kids were asleep. She was an enthusiastic, if rather conventional, lover – afterwards, when she'd finished

smoothing back her hair and tucking her shirt into her skirt, she turned to blow him a kiss. Max looked away. He couldn't stand the little gestures of affection. She'd got what she came for, hadn't she? And so had he, in a way. He was a man now. Sort of.

He lay on the bed after she'd disappeared down the stairs, smoking and contemplating his next move. Money. That was what it took, that was what it was all about. Money to get out of there, to get on in the world, to *make* it. He wanted to hear the faint chink of good china at the dinner table, to eat food carefully prepared by others, to lift the lid on a tureen of soup and let the aroma of meat, vegetables and spices waft through the air. He wanted to sleep on a firm mattress, with clean, freshly laundered sheets and to spend his days doing something other than swilling out blood and guts and watching Mr Henderson, the butcher, carefully portioning out Spam and shrivelled sausages to hungry, patiently waiting housewives. He stubbed out his cigarette and rolled over onto his back, staring at the ceiling.

2

Becky looked at Amber's tight, unhappy face, wishing desperately that there was something she could say to cheer her up. She tried, but couldn't think of a single thing. She was as upset as Amber was. Going away? For six whole weeks? She couldn't believe it. Amber would miss Becky's fourteenth birthday party, as well as all the end-of-term events they'd been planning since for ever. She picked at her duvet cover sullenly, wondering how *she* was going to manage. They were inseparable. They'd been so ever since the day Amber had stood up for her in playschool, almost ten years earlier. One of the boys in their little group had pulled Becky's pigtails and called her horrid names. Amber jumped up, stumbled over their plastic desks and thumped him so hard that tears immediately sprang out of his eyes. She'd been sent home by the teacher for her display of aggression but it had earned her Becky's undying admiration and affection. In return, Becky offered Amber a close, sisterly friendship, a kind of companionship she'd never had in the cold, lonely house in Holland Park.

Tucked away under the attic in Becky's room, playing together for hours on end, and later, talking or walking down Bayswater, going to the ice rink or looking at the clothes in the shop windows and discussing the boys in class, Amber felt normal, part of a normal family, like everyone else. Becky's great virtue, as far as Amber was concerned, was that she was

constant. Not moody, like Max; not sullen, like Kieran; not wilful, like Angela. Becky was always the same. Cheerful, generous with her affection and time and always willing to do what Amber wanted; they balanced each other perfectly. They were always in and out of each other's homes, although, as Angela's drinking became more and more pronounced, Amber would always try to engineer things so that it was Becky's house they went to after school, not hers. Not after that day when they'd crept into Angela's walk-in wardrobe to play dressing up amongst the hundreds of clothes that hung, still in their pristine, plastic sheaths and found Angela there, propped up like a rag doll, an empty whisky glass in her hand, clutching a mound of tissue paper and new clothes to her chest. She found it soothing, she murmured, slurring her words. *All the new clothes. So clean and fresh* . . . Amber yanked Becky backwards by the hand and ran downstairs, not stopping until they'd reached Becky's front door and she'd pressed the bell almost ten times before Becky's mother came to answer.

'Shall we . . . d'you want to go to the shops?' Becky asked tentatively.

'What for?'

'Well, you could get some . . . you know . . . clothes and things . . . for going to Rome,' Becky suggested, trying, for once, to be practical.

'I don't *need* anything,' Amber muttered angrily.

'I know, but . . . well, we can't just sit here all afternoon.'

'Yes I can.' Amber was sulkily adamant. Becky sighed. She knew better than to argue with Amber when she was in a mood. Sometimes, Becky thought to herself, Amber was just the teeniest little bit like her father. Not that she'd ever say it to her. Amber would probably reach across the bed and thump her. There was something about Amber's father, Max, that terrified Becky. He was about as unlike a father as anyone's she'd ever met. It was true he was good looking – tall, well dressed, glamorous – and that he was rich and famous and everything but still, he was so remote and unapproachable and you never really knew what he was going to say when he did notice you. Although her own father paled into insignificance beside Max, Becky was actually quite relieved to have an absent-minded, rather boring-by-comparison father at home, even if she did have to keep reminding him who the Osmonds were and why she liked Donny best. At least she didn't have to think about what to say to him before she said it. She looked at Amber rather uneasily until her mother called up to them: she'd made brownies for tea . . . didn't they want any?

Two doors up and across the road in their spacious, elegant townhouse, Angela Sall picked up the little silver flask and shook out the last drops of brandy into the empty tea cup. She looked around her. The drawing room

was immaculate and silent. Krystyna had brought a large bunch of scarlet roses from the florist on the corner. They sat in a glass vase opposite her on the mahogany side table, their petals the only splash of colour in the calm, white space. Angela felt closer to them, to their crimson, bleeding presence than to the neutral, off-white serenity surrounding her. The decor upstairs where she mostly lived had been Max's choice. She paused, her hand hovering on the little silver bell she used to summon her staff from downstairs. She needed a refill, a little pick-me-up, something to help her through the long, tedious late afternoon. She had no idea when her husband would be back. These days, she reflected sombrely, she didn't seem to have much of an idea about anything. But it hadn't always been that way. Unlike Max, whom she was sure never wasted a second thinking about the way things had been, she could remember everything. Every single, little, precious detail. She could remember exactly when she'd first set eyes on Max – it, was in her, parents' country home in Wiltshire, the very day the Beatles' first hit single, 'Love Me Do', was released. 5 October 1962. She remembered it because she and her sister, Mary Ann, were dancing around in the kitchen listening to it on the radio when the back door opened and a tall, striking young man walked in, a braided cap in hand. He was Lord Sainsbury's chauffeur, Mrs Bambridge, the cook, told her. She and Mary Ann stopped dancing, giggling nervously as Mrs Bambridge led the young man into the tea room at the back of the kitchen. She remembered his dark, dark eyes on her and the way her sister nudged her in the ribs and told her to stop staring. At dinner that evening with Lord Sainsbury and his wife, her eyes kept wandering to the kitchen to where the young man – Max, she'd found out his name – was eating supper with Mrs Bambridge and her father's butler. They were staying the night; she heard her mother giving the housekeeper instructions to make up the Blue Room for their guests and the small room above the kitchen for the driver. She ignored her sister's looks of alarm and went outside after supper, ostensibly to take a walk in the gardens but really looking out across the lawn towards the kitchens to see if he might appear.

She was sixteen. Pretty, wealthy, horribly sheltered. She'd never been courted, never even been kissed. Well, not properly. Not in the way she'd have liked. She was desperate to get out of the unbearably stuffy circle of her parents, Lord and Lady Weymouth, and into what she called the *real* world – London, the big city – to hang out with the people and places she had heard about on the radio and seen on television. She thought she looked a little like the woman she'd seen on the cover of *Vogue* one day in the local newsagents, Jean Shrimpton, and although her mother certainly wouldn't let her buy the magazine, Angela spent hours trying to puff her hair up in the same way and secretly wore the palest pink lipstick at dinner.