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What You Don't Know

Written by David Belbin

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What You Don't Know

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For Don and Jo-Anne Freeman

PROLOGUE

June 1998

‘Sarah, can I have a word?’ the Home Secretary asked. ‘Of course.’ Sarah followed her boss out of the debating chamber, expecting him to congratulate her on the speech she’d just made. The riot at Wormwood Scrubs had ruined her weekend, but it was over and, as prisons minister, she had come out of the situation with her reputation enhanced.

‘There’s somebody who needs to speak to you urgently,’ he said when they were alone. ‘Could you go with Sir Robin?’

The senior civil servant was standing, discreetly, by a large bookcase filled with the biographies of Sarah’s fellow MPs. He led her into the depths of the Commons estate.

‘Can you tell me what this is about?’ Sarah asked.

‘I’m afraid not. It’s an informal interview, but I would advise you to be very careful about what you say.’

Sarah was worried now. ‘An informal interview with whom?’

The question was ignored. Sir Robin knocked on an unlabelled door. He ushered her inside but didn’t join her, which was probably for the best, as this office had barely enough room for the

two people already there. Sarah suspected that the space was normally used for storage. The desk that the suited men sat behind was shabby and utilitarian. There were no windows or pictures on the walls.

The men introduced themselves as police officers. Sarah was too flustered to take in names, but she got their ranks: a detective chief inspector and a detective superintendent. As a former police officer herself, she knew immediately how serious this was. The DCI asked the questions.

‘We need some sensitive information, Minister.’

‘About what?’

‘Your relationship with Paul Morris.’

‘I see.’

‘How would you describe your relationship with Mr Morris?’

‘A professional one. We serve on some of the same committees.’

‘Perhaps, to save time, I should show you an item we found in Mr Morris’s flat. Can you confirm that these are yours?’

He held up an evidence bag containing a pair of pale blue knickers with a small navy ribbon bow. Sarah tried to keep her voice neutral.

‘Possibly. I do own some underwear like that.’

‘And can you confirm that you left Mr Morris’s King’s Cross apartment at twenty-five to eight last Friday morning?’

They must have a witness. Stupid to lie. ‘Yes, I did.’

‘I take it you weren’t there for a business meeting.’

‘No, I wasn’t.’

‘Can you tell me what state Mr Morris was in when you left that morning?’

‘Angry. I’d just dumped him. So from then on our relationship became purely professional, which is why I characterized it in that manner just now.’ Should she have explained her earlier obfuscation? Too late, she’d blurted it out.

‘You’re sure that he was the angry one, not you?’

‘I never get angry, Inspector, except for effect. Maybe angry’s not the best word for the state that Paul was in. He was miffed, insulted, eager to change my mind.’

‘Change your mind about what?’

‘About my not seeing him again.’

The men exchanged glances. The superintendent spoke. ‘And you won’t be seeing him again, will you?’

‘Not outside our professional relationship, no. But I don’t understand what you’re getting at. What has Paul done?’

‘Just to reiterate, he was in good health when you left him?’

‘He was. Very good –’ Sarah stopped herself. ‘Wait. Are you telling me that . . .’

The superintendent took over. ‘Paul Morris was murdered, Minister. Some time on Friday morning, according to the pathologist. You were seen hurrying down Pentonville Road with what passers-by referred to as a “distracted air” at around twenty to eight the same morning. Is that accurate?’

For the first time, Sarah hesitated. ‘Before we go any further,’ she said, ‘I think I’d better consult my solicitor.’

I

October 1997

You have nice clothes, top trainers and great hair. Twice a week you're late back from school. Once you were spotted getting out of his car.

'Was that your trick dropping you off?' a girl from the hostel asked. 'Likes the uniform, does he?'

It's not the uniform, he says. He likes what's underneath.

You meet after school. Mid-afternoon suits him best. He doesn't want you to waste time going home, getting changed and made-up. He wants your pale white skin against his, as often as time allows. In the back of the car, in rented rooms and back alleys. Weekends are a no-go. He gives you nice stuff and, occasionally, money. But never a set amount. You're not a whore. Loads of girls give it away to older guys. You know why, and you know where it leads. Your guy doesn't give you drugs, and he always uses protection. All he asks is you don't go with anybody else.

You've got exams next year and your school is shit. You never have the same teachers from one term to the next. Only

a couple can keep order in the classroom. After four years, you're sick of it. You showed him your report. He knows how smart you are. He wants you to be all the things that you want to be. He'll help. At fifteen, he says, everything is still possible.

Tonight he takes you to the out-of-town multiplex. On the way, you talk about your week. He likes it when you ramble on. He never tells you what he's been up to: he says it's boring. You've chosen an old grey jumper that got you funny looks from mates in class. Makes it look like you've got no boobs. He likes to get you in at the child's rate. It excites him. You've picked a film that's been out a while, so the screen is nearly empty: you have a row to yourselves at the back. You're well away from the aisle. He slips his hand down your knickers during the trailers, fingers you in the opening titles. Sometimes you'd prefer to enjoy the film, but that's not why you're here.

By the time the film starts, it's his turn. You go down on him until he lifts your head and kisses you on the lips. He doesn't come. That happens later, in the disabled toilets, where he takes you from behind, over the sink. This bit is always quick. Afterwards, he cleans up, shoves some cash in your pocket, leaves before you do. You watch the rest of the film, then take a taxi home. You wait for him to call again.

You're not allowed to be in love. Love is for those who can afford it. Love is a luxury, sex a necessity. He says you have to wait until your life's sorted before falling in love, laying yourself open like that.

Whatever he wants to call it, you're his. You'd carry a child for him. You'd kill for him. After him, the smelly boys who hang around the hostel, with their cheap drugs and cheaper clothes, have nothing to offer you. Your only worry is he'll get bored. You're jailbait now, but you won't be for ever. Your boobs are

still growing. Your thighs are getting thicker. You're getting taller. He says you'll always be his princess. Always.

He'd better not be lying.

The meeting was at Hambleton Hall, a country house retreat on Rutland Water, an hour's drive from Nottingham. The round table in the private dining room held eight people, as long as they sat just a little too close together. Sarah was the only woman and the only MP. Eric Turnbull, the chief constable, was on her right. Now and then his left thigh brushed her skirt. Deliberately, she assumed. He had form in that area.

They were here to discuss the city's long-term drug strategy. Compared to the rest of the city, Nottingham West, Sarah's constituency, didn't have a drugs problem. It was relatively well-off, a former Conservative seat. Her constituents didn't need to commit crimes to pay for the drugs they used. So she had been surprised when Eric asked her to come along, calling in a favour that made it impossible for her to refuse.

Eric, it turned out, knew something she didn't. Two years ago, Nottingham's Crack Action Team had been established to deal with the addiction epidemic that crack cocaine had created in the city. In its short lifetime, the CAT had been deemed to be very successful. Until today.

'How is it possible?' Sarah asked the meeting. 'Are you seriously telling me that the head of the team you set up to deal with the crack epidemic is also the city's biggest crack dealer?'

'It's looking that way,' the chief constable said.

'We're going to be the laughing stock of the country.'

'Only for a day or two,' said Paul Morris. 'What we have to discuss today is damage limitation.'

County councillor Paul Morris had a legal background and was highly articulate, but these weren't the main reasons for his election as chair of the police committee. He'd been given the nod

because he was black, with parents born in Guyana. Thing was, the city's police needed a figurehead to help counter its reputation for racism. A justified reputation. For the first couple of meetings, Paul gave the impression that he was out of his depth. Soon, however, it became clear that he wasn't afraid to take risks, talk tough and tell things the way they were.

Frank Davis, head of the Crack Action Team, had also been given his job largely because he was black. Sarah had never met him, but people said he was forceful and charismatic. Davis spoke at anti-drug conferences up and down the country.

It wasn't long before rumours started to circulate about him and his ten-strong team. City politicians were quick to dismiss these as racism or paranoia. Until this morning, when Davis was arrested for possession of several thousand pounds' worth of crack cocaine.

For half an hour, the round table discussed the fiasco, which would be all over the papers in a day or two. Two years ago, when the city's other MPs gave the CAT their backing, Sarah wasn't asked for her support. She wasn't expected to survive this year's general election. By-election gains usually reverted to the original party. However, thanks to Labour's landslide victory, Sarah had hung on to her seat, albeit with a decreased majority. When Eric insisted that she come today, he hadn't told her that none of the city's other MPs had been invited. As chief constable, he would have known that Davis was about to be busted. And he would know that the police authority would need a politician with national status and clean hands to spin this story to the national media. Sarah had been stitched up, good and proper.

Paul Morris was the first to move the agenda on in a positive way.

'This is a PR disaster, but we have to salvage something from the wreckage. We have to show that we have a replacement ready.'

'That would take months to set up,' Eric pointed out.

'Not if we expand an already existing organization.'

‘This is premature,’ John Wood, the County Council leader said. ‘Let the dust settle. Otherwise whatever replaces the Crack Action Team will be tarred with the same brush.’

‘We can’t afford to let that happen,’ Sarah argued. ‘We need to help vulnerable young people and we need to be seen to help them.’

‘I agree with Sarah,’ Paul Morris told the meeting. ‘We can’t just give up. The demand for crack is still there and the problems it generates are getting worse. We have a pilot operation that police and politicians can get behind. The Power Project. I took Eric there the other day.’

He handed over to the chief constable. Eric explained that, while the Power Project had been set up to help long-term drug users, its remit could be expanded to help young people too.

‘Could we divert some of the better CAT workers to this Power Project?’ Sarah asked him.

‘No. We don’t know for sure which of those workers are involved in the drugs trade. There was a rash of accusations and counter-accusations. Therefore, in order to isolate the new body from the old body, no drugs workers – no matter how squeaky clean they might appear – should be employed in the new unit.’

‘Who’s in charge of the Power Project?’ Sarah asked.

‘Kingston Bell. Do you know him?’

‘I know *of* him. We’ve not met. But he sounds like a good choice.’

Sarah knew that Bell was a community activist with church connections. The *Nottingham Evening Post* had done a story on him recently, when he was awarded an MBE for services to the community. He had been brought up in a children’s home and was now on the board of several city institutions that looked after kids in similar situations.

‘To conclude,’ Eric said. ‘We want to give the Power Project a big boost. I’d like everyone to do their bit by talking the place up.’

*

Over dinner, Sarah discovered that Paul Morris had excellent taste in food. Like her, he ordered the scallop ravioli, following it with roasted French partridge with ceps. The food was exceptional, as was the wine, which Eric chose. When the final plates were cleared, a waitress poured generous brandies and left the bottle on the table. Cigars were lit. Several separate conversations broke out at once.

‘Rumour has it you’re moving on,’ Sarah said to Paul.

‘You’re well informed. Yes, I’m giving up the council seat, heading for the capital. An offer too good to refuse. I’ve only told Eric. Did he . . .?’

Sarah shook her head. She had no intention of giving away her source, the Home Secretary. ‘Congratulations. Is Annette looking forward to living in London?’

‘She’s going to stay in Nottingham for the time being. You know how it is, with the kids settled at their schools.’

‘I expect we’ll see each other on the train.’

‘I hope so,’ Paul said, then leaned in closer. ‘There was a favour I want to ask of you. It’s about the Power Project. Thing is, Suraj Hanspal persuaded me to be on the management board, but carrying on isn’t compatible with my new role. The project needs somebody weighty to reassure the agencies concerned that there’ll be proper scrutiny.’

Sarah, experienced in such matters, got in her refusal before he could take it any further. ‘I don’t think so, Paul. You know how busy the Home Office keeps me. And how marginal my seat is.’

‘It’d be worth votes. And we’re talking one meeting a month, half of which you can skip. Six afternoons a year and a couple of press conferences. I’d be forever in your debt.’

‘Many men have said that to me,’ Sarah replied, with a wry smile. ‘Not one’s paid up yet. I prefer payment in advance.’

‘Name your fee,’ Paul said, with a cheeky smile.

Eric stood up. 'I'd like to propose a toast,' he said. 'To a departing friend.' And then he turned to Paul and smiled.

'Did you know that Eric was going to let the cat out of the bag about your new job?' Sarah asked Paul later, in the drawing room. The cigar smoke had got too much for her, and Paul, gallantly, had escorted her to this elegant but cosy room, with its heavy curtains, wood fire and array of easy chairs and sofas. Earlier, Eric had not been able to spell out the nature of Paul's new job, only hint at its importance. Sarah knew that Paul was to head up a hush-hush policy research unit at the Home Office.

She sipped her third brandy, conscious that she was a little drunk, hence dangerously indiscreet. 'Got a place in London yet?'

'Hotel. Looking to buy. I don't like wasting money on rent.'

'And you call yourself a socialist. What happened to "property is theft"?'

'Proudhon would have been the first to change his mind when economic circumstances changed.'

'I expect you're right,' Sarah said, standing. 'Must get to bed.'

'Me too.' Paul followed. 'I'll get you those papers about the Power Project.'

'It can wait until morning,' Sarah said, already at the stairs.

'I'm taking off before breakfast. It'll only take me a minute.'

'Whatever. I'm in here.' There was a boyish twinkle in his eyes, so she added, as she unlocked the door, 'No funny business.'

'Last thing on my mind,' he said.

She kicked off her shoes and waited for him to return. This was the Noel Coward room, which was said to have been regularly used by the famous playwright. It was large, with an expansive double bed and two armchairs on either side of the TV. Sarah went into the bathroom and checked her make-up. She heard a gentle knock on the door.

'It's not locked.'

She wasn't going to sleep with Paul, but maybe she'd offer him a nightcap while she glanced at the papers, made up her mind about the project. She would rebuff any pass politely, with just a hint that in London, during the week, she might one day behave differently. She wouldn't, but Paul was gorgeous. She enjoyed his attention. And she hadn't had sex for – count them – seven months. A girl had to remind herself how to flirt or she might lose the facility. The door opened.

'I hoped you'd like some company.' It wasn't Paul. It was Eric. The recently separated chief constable swayed slightly. He held a bottle of Armagnac, two thirds full, in his left hand. 'You look fantastic tonight, by the way.'

'And you look pissed. Eric, what are you doing here?'

'You know how long I've . . . I thought that, now I'm free, well . . .'

There was another knock on the door.

'Answer it, would you?' Sarah said. 'Or would you prefer to hide in the wardrobe to make the bedroom farce complete? I think it's big enough.'

Her suitor turned to the wardrobe in question and appeared to contemplate the suggestion.

'It's open,' Sarah called.

'I brought you those papers about that project.' Paul Morris had a folder in one hand and a bottle in the other. Sarah swore under her breath. Paul's eyes met Eric's. Each wore a sheepish yet defiant expression: schoolboys who had been found out. Sarah took the folder from Paul, then held the door open.

'Looks like you boys are set to party all night,' she said. 'Try not to wake me when you come up to bed. I have to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for my surgery tomorrow.'

She locked the door behind them.