

Soraya
LANE

The
Paris
Daughter



Soraya Lane graduated with a law degree before realising that law wasn't the career for her and that her future was in writing. She is the author of historical and contemporary women's fiction, including the #1 Kindle bestselling novels *The Last Correspondent* and *The Secrets We Left Behind*.

Soraya lives on a small farm in her native New Zealand with her husband, their two young sons and a collection of four legged friends. When she's not writing, she loves to be outside playing make-believe with her children or snuggled up inside reading.

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SPHERE

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Thank you for everything you've done to bring this series to my readers x

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PROLOGUE

Rue Cambon, Paris, August 1937

Evelina tucked the champagne glass close to her body as she admired the bold design, *her bold design*, on the mannequin wearing her dress. It was the very first time she'd shown a collection, the doors to the apartment firmly shut to ensure that only invited guests could see what was on display. The shimmering silk and intricate buttons of each dress were being studied and admired by those gathered, and she couldn't help but smile when she overheard one of the men describe her dresses as breathtaking. She'd wondered if she'd ever be able to step out from the shadow of her husband, but if tonight was an indication of her future success... she breathed deeply, a smile touching her lips again as she sipped her champagne. *Ex-husband*. Sometimes she couldn't help but think of him, but Théo was firmly in her past now. She'd received their divorce papers almost one year ago, and even though he'd screamed at her that she'd never succeed without him, now it was he who was struggling to keep the doors to his fashion empire open. She hadn't wanted him not to succeed, but if it had to be a competition between the two of them, then so be it.

She looked around, reminding herself of just how far she'd come, of the odds she'd overcome to succeed on her own. The entire evening was almost impossible to believe: the culmination

of months of work and a little luck, but it had been worthy of every sacrifice. There had been times she'd worried whether she could truly make a name for herself—whether someone like her would ever be accepted, especially with Théo's words echoing in her mind, haunting her—but tonight, she wholeheartedly, *finally*, felt as if she belonged.

Evelina slipped from the room and disappeared onto the narrow balcony, lighting a cigarette and taking a moment to stare out at the skyline. She never took the beauty of Paris for granted, and on a night such as this, she wanted to reflect on the years it had taken to get to this moment.

As Evelina lifted her cigarette and placed it between her lips, she felt a gentle pressure at the small of her back. She turned, surprised that anyone present would touch her so intimately, and through a haze of smoke she met the eyes of a man she'd noticed inside earlier, his dark blond hair neatly combed, and his eyes a vivid blue. When he smiled, she found she couldn't look away.

'Evelina Lavigne,' he said, 'it's a pleasure to meet you at last.'

CHAPTER 1

Present Day

Blake stared out of the window of the boardroom, twirling her pen between her fingers as she tried to listen to the conversation going on around her. The floor-to-ceiling windows in their Mayfair office were a frame to the busy London streets below, and she couldn't help but be distracted by the view. They'd been in a meeting for the better part of an hour, and from the distressed pitch of her editor's voice, they weren't getting anywhere. After so long sitting, she was beginning to find it hard to concentrate.

She made herself turn back to look at the woman who'd given her a chance eight years earlier, and saw the exasperation etched on her face. Deborah was her editor and her mentor, and Blake could sense the depth of her frustration as she faced the roomful of disengaged writers and junior editors. They'd become incredibly close in the years since Deborah had hired her, and she had great respect for her not only as a boss, but also as one of the most talented editors in publishing. And today she could feel her weariness—it seemed that no one had any ideas that didn't sound exactly like what everyone else had already used a hundred times over, or that they'd published themselves.

'I don't think any of you understand what's at stake here. If we don't make this new digital format a success, we'll all be out of a

job.’ Deborah sat back down in her chair with a sigh. ‘We need new content, we can’t just recycle old ideas. Exciting, fresh stories will drive readers to our site, which will in turn attract bigger advertisers and keep you all employed. But what we really need is a reason for our readers to subscribe, something to keep them coming back. We need content that makes them want to pay over five pounds a month, when they’re already being bombarded with streaming services and publishing subscriptions dropping into their inbox every single week. We need something to set us apart, to make this launch a guaranteed success.’

The room was silent, and Deb threw her hands up into the air. Blake quickly cleared her throat, trusting her instincts and saying the first thing that came into her mind before someone else tried to reinvent the idea of pop quizzes, or suggest an article dissecting which fashion designer might be the favourite of Princess Kate. Again. She had the ability to save this meeting, and she needed to do it before Deborah stormed out of the room and gave up on them all completely. Deb always told her to think big and pitch the stories she truly wanted to write, and up until today, Blake had never been brave enough. But if there was a chance their jobs could be on the line, she knew that now was the time to speak up.

‘What about a series of feature articles, blog-style?’ Blake asked, sitting up straighter as she stared at her boss. ‘I’m thinking late ’90s, Carrie from *Sex and the City*. I know you explicitly said not to recycle old, but what if that’s what people want again? To really hear the writer’s voice and connect with her experiences, feel the nostalgia of the past? There’s something about that era I think my generation is yearning for.’

‘I’m listening,’ Deborah said, her eyebrows raised as she leaned forward in her chair and gestured to Blake. ‘Please, continue.’

‘I think we need to write about the things that no one else is writing about, and that means going deep with personal journeys instead of just scratching the surface with the latest trend or asking every high-profile woman we interview how she juggles work and kids, or how she puts together a capsule wardrobe.’ Blake paused, still not sure whether to pitch the specific idea she was mulling, or keep it to herself. She hesitated. ‘If I’m completely honest, I think we need to make ourselves vulnerable by putting our genuine life experiences on the page.’

‘If you have something specific in mind, now is your chance to pitch it. But I don’t want to do anything dating-related, and no gimmicks about being single, because quite frankly, I don’t have the stomach for it. I’m also sick to death of hearing about dating apps.’

‘What about a mystery, then?’ Blake asked. ‘Something that keeps our readers coming back to find out the rest of the story, something to get them invested in the outcome? Something that makes it worth paying a subscription for, because if they cancel after their free trial, they’ll never know the ending?’

‘I think there are enough true crime podcasts out there,’ one of the writers muttered. ‘I thought she wanted fresh?’

‘Go and get us some coffees,’ Deborah ordered, giving the young writer a withering look, before lowering her voice. ‘You want to be in the room, then show some goddamn respect to your fellow writers, especially the senior writer who is actually contributing to the conversation. That goes for all of you.’

Blake took a breath, turning her attention back to Deborah as the young guy skulked from the room. 'I received something last year,' Blake said, deciding that it was now or never. 'I was given a little wooden box that supposedly belonged to my great-grandmother, and to cut a long story short, it appears she put her child up for adoption—my grandmother, Mary.' She paused, clearing her throat as she noticed that some of the more junior editors looked particularly disinterested. She was almost certain she could see their eyes glazing over. 'Anyway, she left clues behind in case said grandmother ever came looking for her. They were left hidden in the little box for decades, until now.'

Blake immediately wished she'd kept her mouth shut. *Why oh why did I feel the need to share all of that?* She'd been pushing away thoughts of the box for months, not ready to go down the rabbit hole of discovering her grandmother's past and bringing back all those memories, and yet she'd just gone and told everyone in the room her long-held secret.

Her editor's eyebrows stayed raised, as if she'd finally heard something that interested her. 'You officially have my attention. Please, continue.'

'I haven't had the time to really delve into it, but what if I wrote about it for our readers? Took them on the journey with me as I tried to uncover past secrets? It would be a personal story, but one that not even the writer knows the ending to.'

Deborah sat back and smiled, giving Blake a look that told her she'd pitched her exactly what she'd been waiting for all morning.

'Now *that* is what I call fresh content, and you're right, the mystery is what would sell it, the fact that even the writer doesn't

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know the outcome until almost the moment the reader does,' Deborah said, before turning to her assistant, who was furiously taking notes beside her. 'Lucy, can you make a lunch reservation for two at Kitty Fisher's? Blake, work up some ideas and clear the rest of the day. I'll have a car waiting to take us to lunch at one p.m.' She spun back round and addressed the room. 'We still need a lot more content. This is only the start, so I want everyone working on pitches for me. I'll call a meeting on Wednesday to hear them all.'

Blake swallowed, not sure whether she'd just pitched the best idea of her life or the very worst. She glanced at her watch. The only thing that *was* clear was that their lunch reservation was only two hours away, which meant she had virtually no time to come up with the presentation of a lifetime.

CHAPTER 2

Later that day, Blake walked out of the office a few steps behind her editor, who seemed to have abandoned the idea of being driven to lunch.

‘Is it okay with you if we walk?’ Deborah asked, gesturing towards the sky. ‘The sun is actually shining for once, and I could do with the fresh air. I feel like I haven’t left the office in a week.’

‘Tough few days?’ Blake asked, surprised to see her editor light up a cigarette.

‘I keep a packet of these in my bag for emergencies, and this box has been here for almost six months,’ Deborah said as she took a long, slow drag and blew the smoke away in the other direction. ‘I officially gave up years ago, but every now and then, I let myself have one. Let’s just say that this week, I’ve almost smoked the lot, so yeah, you could say it’s been a tough few days.’

Blake grimaced. ‘It’s that bad in the office?’

‘It’s that bad.’ Deborah sighed as they began to walk. Blake was grateful for the sunshine, but wished she’d known to pack trainers as she hurried to keep up. ‘We’re in the same situation as almost every other magazine, trying to serve our loyal print customers while at the same time aiming to stay relevant enough in the digital landscape to attract new readers and keep our advertisers. And when things don’t go to plan, I’m the first one they blame. It’s not just all of you who could lose your jobs; mine’s on the line, too.’

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‘I see wine in our immediate future then,’ Blake said, comfortable enough to speak plainly after so long working together. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t realise how bad things were for you.’

‘There’s a reason I booked Kitty’s,’ Deborah said, as they neared the restaurant. It was easily within walking distance of their Mayfair office, so it made perfect sense they’d chosen to go on foot. ‘The food is excellent, but the wine list is even better, and to be honest it might be the last long lunch I can charge to the company card if things don’t improve.’

They both laughed, before walking the rest of the way in a comfortable silence. Blake liked Deborah; they were a good team, and she couldn’t have asked for a better editor, but it didn’t stop her from being nervous about what she was about to pitch, especially looking at the time frame she’d been given to finesse it. Or how much she’d be putting her own life under the microscope. But if she wanted to push herself, then she was going to have to get used to feeling slightly out of her depth.

The restaurant appeared ahead of them, with its awning stretched out at the front and the two outdoor tables full, a small dog looking up at her from beside its owner. Blake had only been a couple of times before, and always for work, and each time it had reminded her of how a little bistro in France would look, with the restaurant nestled at the bottom of an old brick building, rather nondescript until one stepped inside. She opened the door for Deborah and followed her in, where her boss was greeted by name, before they were ushered to a table near the back. The restaurant smelt delicious, and Blake found her stomach rumbling immediately.

‘Okay, tell me all about this new idea of yours,’ Deborah said as she nodded to the waiter that they did, indeed, want the wine list. ‘It sounds intriguing. Why didn’t you pitch it to me before now?’

Blake folded herself down into the chair, surprised that they were getting straight to business. She tucked her long hair behind her ears, running her fingers to the ends as she often did when she was nervous. ‘It is intriguing, but I wasn’t ready to share it until today. I mean, it’s going to take some serious sleuthing to figure out what it all means, but—’

‘Before you go any further, are you quite certain that you want to put yourself, and your family, out there like this? Once you start writing, you’re going to have to be brutally honest and share absolutely everything that you discover, in order for this to be authentic.’ Deborah paused. ‘It’s not lost on me that you’re normally very private when it comes to your family.’

Blake nodded. Deborah was right; she was usually intensely private. And it was precisely the reason she’d hesitated before pitching it that morning.

‘I know what’s at stake here, and what’s expected of me, and I’ve decided that it’s worth it. The reader will have to be there with me, every step of the way.’

‘I like it. And I’m proud of you! I feel as if it’s taken until now, with so much in the balance, for you to pitch me something bold instead of playing it safe.’

‘Go big or go home, right?’ Blake joked.

‘Go big or go home,’ Deb repeated with a sigh. ‘I feel like that’s the motto of my working life these days.’ Deborah paused their

conversation only to order wine, before turning back to Blake. 'Shall we order our food now, too? Then we won't have any more interruptions.'

Blake quickly scanned the menu. 'Anything you'd recommend?'

'Shall we both have the pork chop and order some sides? Perhaps the crispy potatoes and the roasted beetroot? They never disappoint.'

'Sounds great.'

Their waiter left them and Deborah leaned in, her arms folded on the table. 'I think it's time you started from the very beginning, Blake. I need to know exactly how all of this came about, and how we're going to position these stories, if we proceed. What's the format, and how will each story unfold? And most importantly, when can you deliver the first instalment?'

Blake took a breath, grateful for the speed at which their wine arrived so she was able to have a large gulp before answering. It suddenly felt very much as if the entire success of the magazine was riding on her shoulders, and her ability to deliver a binge-worthy series of stories. She also had to hope that people would even want to read about her family mystery.

She reached into her bag and took out the little wooden box that she'd gone home to retrieve between their meeting this morning and now, running her fingers over the smooth edges. Initially she'd sat down to work on a written pitch at her desk, but then she'd realised that what she needed was to show Deborah the clues and decided to use her time to retrieve it. There was something powerful about seeing an object from the past, especially one that had been so thoughtfully put together.

‘This is the box,’ Blake said, sliding it across the table. She’d retied the string that had been around it when she’d first received it, as well as replacing the little note with her grandmother’s name on there, so that Deb could experience what it had been like for her to open it for the very first time. She wanted her to see it in the way it had been left by her great-grandmother all those years ago.

‘May I?’ Deborah asked, her finger paused on the string.

Blake nodded. ‘I received a letter from a lawyer’s office last year. Well, I should say that my mother received it, but I have power of attorney and as such everything is sent to me.’ Deborah knew enough about her family to understand why Blake had control over her mother’s affairs, and she was grateful that she didn’t ask her any questions. Her sister or brother she could talk about for hours, but discussing her mother was always uncomfortable.

‘And this letter,’ Deb said, as she set the string aside, glancing up at Blake. ‘It told you about the box?’

‘No, it just requested my presence at a meeting, which of course seemed highly unusual at the time.’ Blake watched the look on Deborah’s face as she discovered the contents of the box, taking out first the sketch of a dress on a folded piece of paper, and then a piece of fabric, her fingers lingering over the silk. Blake remembered the first time she’d touched it, too, and how incredibly soft and luxurious it had felt against her skin. ‘I researched the law firm before replying and decided to go with an open mind once I’d confirmed their legitimacy, and when I arrived, I discovered the meeting wasn’t just for me, but for a handful of other women who’d received an identical letter in the mail. We were all summoned together to the same appointment.’

That day was one she would never forget, looking at all the other women as they'd learnt the shared secrets of their families' pasts. Blake still remembered how she'd stared in disbelief at the box bearing her grandmother's name.

She remembered how her fingers had closed over the small wooden box as it was passed to her, and the immediate connection she felt to her grandmother that still overwhelmed her. She'd had to look away, leaving the lawyer's office without even saying thank you to Mia, the pain at discovering such a treasure without her grandma beside her almost too much to bear.

Deb held up the design, shaking her head and pulling Blake from her thoughts. 'This is extraordinary. How old do you think it is?'

'I'm not sure, but I'd say at least seventy years? Maybe older?'

'Go on. Tell me about the meeting.'

'There was a woman there—Mia—and she introduced herself as the niece of Hope Berenson. The law firm had represented her Aunt Hope during her lifetime, and she'd operated a place called Hope's House here in London, for unmarried mothers to give birth and find adoptive parents for their babies.'

Blake took a sip of her wine, before setting her glass down and reaching for the little handwritten name tag, still attached to the string. She ran her fingertips over it as she recalled what Mia had told them that day.

'This Mia had discovered a collection of boxes, all identical, beneath the floorboards of Hope's House. Her aunt passed away some time ago, and with the house set to be demolished, she went to check that nothing personal had been left behind,' Blake said.

‘Each box that she found had a name tag, and this one bore my grandmother’s name. There were seven boxes in total.’

‘So her connection to the house...’ Deb’s question trailed as Blake looked up at her.

‘From what I can understand, it seems that my grandmother was born there, and that her mother, my great-grandmother, left this little box for her after she gave birth. Presumably hoping that her daughter would one day be given it, and maybe discover who she was.’

Blake could see tears shining from Deborah’s eyes as she listened to the story, and she blinked away her own. There was something so emotional about a mother leaving her baby behind, with only a box of trinkets to guide her back. Blake had no way of knowing whether placing her child for adoption was even something her great-grandmother would have wanted to do, or whether it was simply what was done back then. She knew that Deborah had young children of her own, which no doubt made this type of tale even more emotional for her.

‘Did anyone in your family know about the adoption, or was it kept completely secret?’

‘I can’t imagine that anyone knew, but my grandmother passed away years ago, and there’s no one else I can really ask about it,’ Blake said, sitting back as their waiter returned to fill their water glasses. ‘I think it’s fair to say that it came as a surprise to the other women in the room, too, so my guess would be that it was kept a secret from all the families involved. That none of the children who’d been adopted knew that anything had been left behind for them, or that they were even adopted.’

‘How many other women were at the meeting?’ Deborah asked.

‘There were six, including me. We all listened to Hope’s niece, Mia, tell us about her aunt, the lawyer asked us to sign a document and show our identification, and then we were each given our box.’ She paused, taking another sip of wine. ‘There was one box sitting there unclaimed, and when someone asked her about it, she said they hadn’t been able to find any information on who it was left for. But the others were all claimed, and then we left, and—’

‘And you’ve just sat on this information? All this time has passed, and it’s still a mystery to you? You haven’t tried to solve it?’

Blake swallowed, not wanting to answer the question. The truth was, ever since her grandmother had died, she’d found anything to do with her family or the past hard to confront. A big part of her hadn’t been sure whether she even wanted to discover her grandmother’s secrets now that she was gone, even though she’d passed more than a decade ago.

‘I suppose I just didn’t know where to start,’ Blake eventually said. She gestured towards the clues that Deborah was now inspecting all over again. ‘I’ve taken that sketch out of the box probably a hundred times and stared at it, trying to figure out what it means and how to connect it to my past, but that’s as far as I’ve got. But what I keep coming back to is that for my great-grandmother to have left this behind, it must have been of the utmost significance to her. This was all she left for her daughter, who may one day have come looking for her, so she must have thought that it would be an obvious clue at the time.’ *I just haven’t been brave enough to do something about it.*

‘Which means that, if we presume this was her design with her signature at the bottom, it must have been considered something that others would recognise, at the time? Is that what you’re hinting at?’

‘Or perhaps that she *hoped* it would be recognisable by the time her daughter found it? Perhaps she gave up her baby to fulfil her dreams.’ Blake had circled the information round and round in her mind so many times, but the only thing she kept coming back to was that her great-grandmother had been well-known in the fashion world at the time. Why else would she have left a clue with what was presumably her signature at the bottom?

Their food arrived then, and Blake thanked their server as Deborah carefully folded the paper and returned it to the box. She took longer with the piece of fabric, turning it over back and forth in her fingers, before sighing and eventually placing it on top of the paper.

‘Is it just me, or does the box smell ever so slightly of roses?’ Deborah asked. ‘Or is that my imagination getting carried away?’

Blake took the box and inhaled. Deborah was right, it *did* smell ever so faintly like roses. She’d thought it smelt familiar, but she hadn’t been able to put her finger on it. Now she knew.

‘You’re not imagining it. I can smell roses, too. It’s almost as if someone dropped perfume into the box, and even after all these years, it’s still lingering.’

‘It’s fascinating, truly it is, and I think our readers would love the story. You’re absolutely right about the mystery of it all, and it being one of those pieces that will have people coming back, wanting to find out more. There’s nowhere else they can find the

answer, no other site they can go to, to try to find out how the story ends. They would be on this journey with you.'

Blake picked up her knife and fork. The food smelt amazing. 'I can hear a *but* coming,' she said, before taking her first mouthful. It was divine, and she promised herself that she'd start treating herself to a nice meal out more often. She'd spent so much of her life worrying about money, and she still saved as if she was the little girl without food in the fridge. It made extravagant lunches such as these all the more special to her.

Deborah sighed. 'The problem isn't whether I want to run with it or not, because the answer to that is most definitely yes. The issue is, how are you going to unravel the mystery? If you haven't known where to start so far, what will change between today and Monday, when I tell you to hit the ground running?'

Blake finished her mouthful at the same time as Deborah began eating. It wasn't lost on her that she'd been asking herself the very same question.

'I need you to open some doors for me,' Blake said, truthfully. 'I need to know that it's okay to use your name, to approach some of London's most influential creative designers and heads of houses, under the banner of the magazine.'

'Because you think one of them might recognise the signature at the bottom of the design?'

Blake grinned. 'Precisely.'

'Well, then, you officially have my permission to use my name in any way you need. I'll even call ahead if that would help,' Deborah said, waving to get their waiter's attention and ordering more wine. 'I'll pitch it to the board to be our anchor piece for the new launch,

with my full support, of course, but I think they'll love it. Now, let's enjoy lunch, and we'll tell everyone at the office that this took us hours to discuss. I have no intention of going back and suffering through another meeting today.'

Blake laughed and added some of the sides to her plate. She only wished she'd told Deborah about the little box in her possession earlier.

But as she carefully placed the box back in her bag, she felt a tug on her heart. *Or maybe I shouldn't have told her about it at all.*