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BLACKMAN



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Praise for Malorie Blackman's books

'The Noughts & Crosses series are still my favourite books of all time and they showed me just how amazing storytelling could be'

Stormzy

'Flawlessly paced'

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'Unforgettable'

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'A work of art'

Benjamin Zephaniah

'A book which will linger in the mind long after it has been read'

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'A gritty read'

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Malorie Blackman has written over seventy books for children and young adults, including the Noughts & Crosses series, *Thief*, *Cloud Busting* and a science-fiction thriller, *Chasing the Stars*. Many of her books have also been adapted for stage and television, including a BAFTA-award-winning BBC production of *Pig-Heart Boy* and a Pilot Theatre stage adaptation by Sabrina Mahfouz of *Noughts & Crosses*. There is also a major BBC production of *Noughts & Crosses*, with Roc Nation (Jay-Z's entertainment company) curating and releasing the soundtrack as executive music producer.

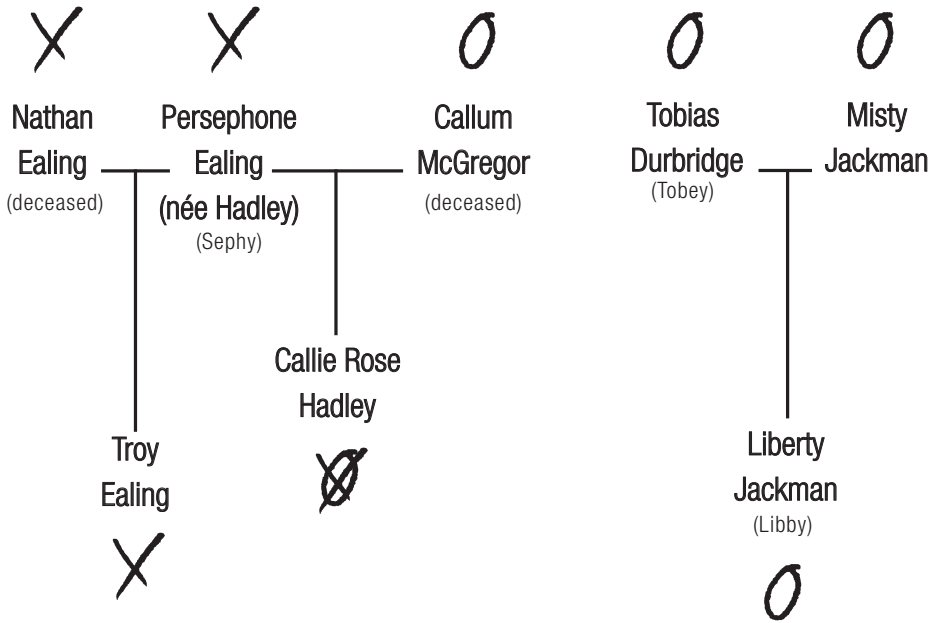
In 2005 Malorie was honoured with the Eleanor Farjeon Award in recognition of her distinguished contribution to the world of children's books. In 2008 she received an OBE for her services to children's literature, and between 2013 and 2015 she was the Children's Laureate. Most recently, Malorie co-wrote the *Doctor Who* episode 'Rosa' on BBC One.

You can find Malorie online:

www.malorieblackman.co.uk

@malorieblackman

For Neil and Liz, with love as always



‘Great ambition is the passion of a great character. Those endowed with it may perform very good or very bad acts. All depends on the principles which direct them.’

– Napoleon Bonaparte



PROLOGUE

The Catalyst

one. Callie



A Nought woman, no doubt some poor jobbing actress desperate to pay her rent, knelt down in the middle of a stylized pigsty. She held twelve leads attached to a number of decorated sculptures of life-sized pink pigs that surrounded her like the petals of a flower, all looking out at the audience. Some of the pigs wore clothes – one a military uniform, another a flowery straw hat and gold-coloured high-heeled shoes. One sported a gaudy sapphire and diamond necklace, the stones as big as plums. Two of them were simulating copulation. The Nought woman at their centre wore a bodysuit that at first glance made her appear naked. She was kneeling, her head down. At random intervals, she looked up to stare at the person directly in front of her for a few seconds before slowly bowing her head again. Now it was my turn to receive her numb stare. My lips twisted in distaste. Blinking rapidly, the ‘exhibit’ lowered her head, her cheeks reddening.

Embarrassed for both of us, I said quietly, ‘The look on my face wasn’t aimed at you. It was aimed at this ridiculous so-called art installation.’

The woman’s head remained bent, the slight tensing of her shoulders and reddened face the only indications that

she'd heard my words. Whether or not she believed them was another matter.

I shook my head, sighing inwardly. It had taken me years to cultivate a poker face, but there were moments – like now – when the mask inadvertently slipped. After glancing at my watch, I took a seat at one end of the gallery. A huge sign hanging above all the exhibits declared: ALBION – LESSONS LEARNED: A 21ST-CENTURY RETROSPECTIVE. Talk about the chieftain's new robes. This was supposed to be the most avant-garde, exciting art exhibition currently in the capital. Nought actors and actresses adorned the various works of art, a few of them naked, some covered from head to toe in body paint of various hues. They sat in, on or among the various exhibits, seldom moving. The whole thing had a melancholy air of crass awkwardness to it.

If I were an art critic, I knew how my review would read: *Dubious style and precious little substance*. The few articles I'd read about this so-called exhibition described it as 'daring', 'innovative', 'a fresh take' – blah-blah.

Yeah, right.

Sauley J'Hara, the Cross artist responsible for this hot mess, had been all over the news during the last two weeks, responding to the very vocal criticism of his art stylings.

'It's a challenging, forward-thinking look at how we used to regard and treat Noughts, juxtaposed with how they are regarded now,' he'd argued. 'This isn't a museum's historical installation; this is art.'

What a steaming pile of horse manure. An exploiter, seeking to define and monetize the exploited. If it really was art, why not use Crosses and other ethnicities in his

exhibition? The whole thing was nothing more than a self-congratulatory exercise in nostalgia for the backward thinkers who still wished – or still believed – they lived in the past.

I looked up at the ceiling and cornices. Now *there* was real art. Panels depicting Zafrika's history – some carved from wood, some from marble, some just painted, but all exquisitely beautiful. I glanced down at my watch again. It hadn't been my choice to meet here and I was burning to leave. The ceiling, which was part of the fabric of the building, I admired. The rest of the exhibition in this gallery was making my skin itch. I drank in the artwork on the ceiling, closing my eyes to imprint it on my memory as I lowered my head. A sudden frisson of awareness crackled through me like a static shock.

'Hello, Callie. What's what?'

The baritone voice made my head snap up.

Tobey Durbridge.

Damn it! My heart jumped at the sight of him, dragging me to my feet. God, it had been so long. Too long. When did the air get so thin in here? There was no other explanation for feeling this light-headed.

Oh, come on! You're a grown woman for God's sake. Get a grip, Callie Rose!

It had been such a long time since Tobey and I last met. A lifetime ago. What had I been expecting? Certainly not this. Over the years, just like the rest of the country, I'd seen Tobey on the TV countless times as he rose in prominence to become the first elected Nought Mayor of Meadowview, then a Member of Parliament, but seeing

him in person was so different. Tobey had moved on and up – the only directions he was ever interested in. He was now the country's first publicly elected Nought Prime Minister and there wasn't a single soul in the country and beyond who didn't know his name. As Solomon Camden, the head of my law chambers, had put it, 'Only a fool would bet against Tobey Durbridge.'

And how had I voted in the recent general election?

Well, I was nobody's fool.

Over the last twelve years, during each general election, the public had had the chance not just to vote for the person they wanted to represent their constituency, but also to choose between two or three candidates from each of the main political parties who would run the country should that party win the majority vote. After the scandal that hit the Liberal Traditionalists a decade ago, it had been judged a more democratic way of electing our country's leader, rather than just relying on each political party to select candidates who may have bought or bribed their way to the top. Over the last couple of years, not a week passed without Tobey making the news headlines, and, when it was announced he was running for Prime Minister, I understood why. Publicity. Publicity. Publicity. The lifeblood of the ambitious.

But, even without all the TV coverage, I would've known this man anywhere. The Tobey of old with his chestnut-brown hair and darker brown eyes still stood in front of me, but his face was harder, and his lips were thinner, and the gleam he'd always had in his eyes – like he was constantly on the verge of a smile – well, that had all but vanished. Something told me it would take a lot to

make Tobey smile these days. And he'd filled out. He was not just taller but broader. He made me feel like I was slacking on the body-conscious front. Which I was, I admit. I enjoyed my food! I hit the treadmill regularly, but only so I wouldn't have to buy a whole new wardrobe every six months. Tobey, on the other hand, wore his charcoal-grey suit like a second skin. That hadn't come off a hanger in a department store. His suit screamed bespoke from the rooftops. His black shoes didn't have a scuff mark on them; his white shirt was spotless, as was his purple silk tie. Damn! He was wearing the hell out of every stitch he had on. Instead of looking staid and boring, he managed to make the whole ensemble look . . . dangerous. Like this guy could quite easily hand you your head if you messed with him, and still look fine doing it.

Suddenly aware that I was staring, I mock sighed. 'For Shaka's sake! I see you're still taller than me.'

A shared smile – and just like that the tension between us lifted.

We grinned at each other as the years began to fall away, but then reality rudely shoved its way between us. Another moment, as we regarded each other. My mind was racing. Should we kiss? Hug? What? I moved forward at the same time as Tobey. A brief, awkward kiss on the lips was followed by a long hug. The warmth of his body and the subtle smell of his aftershave enveloped me. I stepped back. The moment for anything deeper, anything more, came and went and faded away unclaimed.

'It's so good to see you, Tobey.' I felt faintly foolish that I'd had such a visceral reaction to him. 'How are you?'

Tobey opened his mouth, only to close it without saying a word. An eyebrow quirked, followed by that wry smile of his – there it was! ‘I was going to say, *All the better for seeing you*, but you deserve more than cheesy lines and platitudes.’

Momentarily thrown, I wondered how exactly I was meant to respond to that.

Tobey indicated the seat behind us. He waited for me to sit before parking himself next to me, his thigh pressed lightly against mine. His warmth was unsettling in its familiarity. I should’ve moved my leg slightly so that we were no longer touching – but I didn’t.

Time for a change of subject. ‘You and Misty – I guess things didn’t work out between you?’

‘No. We tried for a while but – no. Does that please you?’ said Tobey.

Stung, I said, ‘D’you think I’m so petty that I’ll jump up and down with glee at the news of your break-up? Seriously?’

Thanks a lot.

‘You did warn me that I was making a mistake.’ Tobey shrugged. ‘And more than once.’

My cheeks burned. Not some of my finer moments. ‘I was wrong to do that. One of my many regrets when it comes to you – and us.’

‘Oh? What else d’you regret?’ Tobey asked quietly.

I might have known he’d leap all over that one. No way was I going there.

‘How’s your family?’ I asked.

‘They’re fine. Jessica is doing a masters at uni now and Mum is enjoying her retirement. How’s Troy?’ said Tobey.

I shrugged. ‘Same as ever. He manages to work my last nerve every time we meet.’

Tobey smiled. ‘Isn’t that what all brothers are meant to do to their sisters? I know I have that effect on Jess.’

‘Troy works extra hard at it. He’s seventeen so he’s at the age when he knows *everything*. I love my brother, but he’s hard work.’

‘And your mum? How’s Sephy?’

‘She’s fine. Still running the restaurant,’ I replied.

Tobey nodded. ‘I was sorry to hear about what happened to Nathan.’

‘Thanks.’

‘I mean it. I meant to get in touch, but . . . you know how it is.’

Yeah, I knew exactly how it was. We were old friends who shared painful memories – and a great deal of hurt. How much easier then to let our friendship simmer at a distance rather than boil away to nothing or, worse still, turn to ice between us.

‘Is it worth me apologizing again for what happened?’ asked Tobey, not looking at me but at the people milling about the gallery.

‘Tobey, let it go. I have.’ Which wasn’t quite true, but it would do. ‘Is that why you asked me to meet you here? To rehash old times?’

‘God, no. That’s the last thing I want.’ Tobey now looked directly at me.

As we regarded each other, I felt yet another crack ripple through my heart for what might have been.

So many wasted years. So much wasted time.

‘Why did you want to meet here of all places?’ I had to ask as I took another look around.

‘Restaurant tables can be bugged. Outdoor listening devices have a range of one hundred metres and more; some can pick up conversations through walls. Museums and art galleries tend to have scanner jammers and disruptors built into the fabric of the building so that no one can bypass their security. When I want a truly private conversation, this is where I come. And it’s close to my office.’

‘Oh, I see.’

Nothing to do with the current exhibition then, I realized.

‘I’m surprised to see you alone. Don’t you have minders?’ I couldn’t quite believe that Tobey wandered the streets and went where he liked without bodyguards and security up to his armpits. God knows, there’d been enough threats against his life from the headbangers who believed that being Prime Minister and a Nought should be mutually exclusive. There were even some Nought nutjobs who considered Tobey a traitor for engaging in what they considered ‘Cross politics’.

‘They’re here, don’t worry.’ Tobey gave a faint smile.

Ah! I should’ve known. There had to be upwards of fifty people in the gallery, but Tobey didn’t seem at all concerned. That meant his security detail had to be top-drawer. So good in fact that, as I looked around the room, I had to work at guessing who they might be – there had to be more than one. A Cross woman with braided hair and glasses studiously examined the painting to my right. I’d

put money on her being one of Tobey's bodyguards – or close-protection officers, as they preferred to be known. I continued to look around. A suited Nought man by one of the middle installations kept throwing careless glances in our direction. He wore wireless earbuds like he was listening to music, but I knew better. He was definitely another of Tobey's close-protection officers. I had a nose for them, like I had a nose for undercover cops, guilty clients and bullshit.

And that nose didn't lie or steer me wrong.

Tobey and I were getting some curious glances – Tobey more than me. He was instantly recognizable. Famous and powerful – a killer combination. In the years since school, any doors that hadn't opened for him automatically, Tobey had kicked in. Hard. A couple of people, when they recognized him, immediately tried to make their way over, but they were diverted by a tall, beefy Cross wearing a suit, sunglasses – indoors! – and earbuds. The sunglasses indoors were a dead giveaway.

'So why did you want to see me after all this time?' I asked. 'Shouldn't you be off somewhere being interviewed to within a millimetre of your sanity?'

'I should but I need you, Callie. Look, I'd love to play catch-up and then honey-coat this, but I don't have the time.' Tobey sighed. He took a deep breath, looking into my eyes. 'The thing is . . . I . . . Well, I need your help.'

I bit the inside of my cheek to suppress a grin. 'Wow. Those are obviously some rusty words.'

'Huh?'

'You're not used to asking for help, are you?' I teased.

Tobey's smile faded as quickly as it had arrived. 'You're right, but I really do need you. The thing is – within the next week to ten days, I'm going to be arrested for murder and I require a good lawyer. The best. And that's you.'

What?

Well, damn! Whatever I'd been expecting, that wasn't it. I stared. 'Who are you supposed to have killed?'

Tobey didn't flinch, didn't look away. He didn't even blink. 'Daniel Jeavons.'

My eyes were starting to hurt from staring so hard. A super-surreal conversation in an unconventional setting. Come to think of it, there was no better place for this revelation.

'Dan? Dan is dead?'

Tobey nodded.

Daniel Jeavons, 'ex' criminal and shady AF kingmaker, was dead. Stunned, I tried to process what I'd just heard.

Dan was dead.

'Did you do it?' I asked, the words falling out of nowhere.

The art gallery, the capital, the country, the whole world fell away until there was just Tobey and me watching each other – and the question pushing, pulsing, between us.