

NICOLA WILLIAMS

WITHOUT



PREJUDICE

BLACK BRITAIN



WRITING BACK

WITHOUT PREJUDICE

About the Author

Nicola Williams started her career as a barrister in private practice, specializing in criminal law, including three successful Commonwealth death penalty appeals before the House of Lords sitting as the Privy Council. She was a legal expert on BBC World for the O. J. Simpson trial verdict in 1995 and a member of the first Independent Advisory Group to the Metropolitan Police Service (following recommendations arising from the Stephen Lawrence Report [1999]). She has been a part-time Crown Court judge since 2010. A former winner of the *Cosmopolitan* magazine Woman of Achievement award, she is an active volunteer for the Speakers for Schools programme, a charity which encourages young people from disadvantaged and under-represented communities to achieve their full career potential.

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Nicola Williams

With a new introduction by
Bernardine Evaristo



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Introduction

Black Britain: Writing Back is a new series I've curated with my publisher, Hamish Hamilton, at Penguin Random House. Our ambition is to correct historic bias in British publishing and bring a wealth of lost writing back into circulation. While many of us continue to lobby for the publishing industry to become more inclusive and representative of our society, this project looks back to the past in order to resurrect texts that will help reconfigure black British literary history.

The books included in the series are my personal choices, determined by my literary values and how I perceive the cultural context and significance of the books. The series is not to be regarded as an attempt to be definitive or to create a canon. Canons are by their very nature hierarchical and have traditionally been constructed by the prevailing white orthodoxies of academia. Black British writers rarely appear on these reading lists, are rarely taught to new generations of readers and unless they become commercial successes, their legacy very quickly disappears.

My aim is to present a body of work illustrating a variety of preoccupations and genres that offer important and diverse black British perspectives. Good books withstand the test of time, even

if they are of their time. I am very excited to introduce these books to new readers who will discover their riches.

Without Prejudice is an impressive novel about a black British female barrister who is succeeding against the odds. This in itself makes the novel unique, especially when it was published in 1997, the first and, I suspect, the only such legal thriller from this perspective.

The protagonist, Lee Mitchell, is a thirty-year-old barrister from a working-class Caribbean background. As such, as a child, everything was stacked against her entering the professions, except her own determination and ambition. Twelve years after she has left her multiracial inner-city London school, she is invited back to give a talk. Once there, the careers adviser Mrs Cox describes Lee in front of an audience of staff, pupils and parents as a shining example of an alumna whose success is due to the school's support and encouragement when she was a student. Lee remembers it differently, and recalls how Mrs Cox, 'with a few well-chosen words, could eclipse, at sixteen, any dream you ever had of being more than she expected you to be.' Once on the podium to deliver her speech, Lee forcefully contradicts Mrs Cox's revisionist fantasy and reveals the culture of a school where they believed 'the only work experience we could get was shop work; the highest aim we could have, even the brightest of us, was to be someone's office clerk. You were never, ever encouraged to aim for anything higher.' She ends her talk with this advice to the pupils: 'Don't let anyone put you off, or put you down. Just plan to be a better version of what you already are.' Stunned silence follows and thereafter the hall explodes in applause.

In these first few pages, Lee has been revealed to us as a plucky protagonist who understands what it takes to succeed and wants to share her knowledge. We see how she has to deftly navigate a legal environment where, as a black person and a woman, she feels she will never truly belong. The novel poses the question of how someone like her is able to not only survive but also thrive in what is a traditionally male, moneyed, middle-class, white environment. She must be exceptional, and she is, but it's unfair that she has to be. The obstacles she faces are evident. In the first few pages of the novel she is mistaken for a defendant in a drug case, instead of the white man standing beside her. Nor is it the first time this has happened to her. She's also aware that she's 'tolerated' in her otherwise white chambers because she's good at her job, fair enough, but also because she enhances the firm's reputation by adding 'a little local colour'.

The novel is as much about her professional battles as her personal relationships. External factors drive the plot forward while taking Lee's interior life along the bumpy and unpredictable journey. The characterization of Lee is full-bodied with complexity, agency, credibility. We witness her as an affectionate daughter to her widowed mother and a loving partner to her live-in boyfriend. She reconnects with someone from her schooldays and a complicated relationship develops. She finds herself embroiled with unsavoury characters and doesn't know how to extricate herself. She has few allies and has to draw on her own inner strength. Power play and office politics, criminality and corruption, sexual assault, sexism and racist assumptions, moral dilemmas, betrayals and compromises are thrown into the mix in

this fiction where toxic situations and environments prevail and lives are endangered. A lot is at stake for Lee; this keeps us turning the page.

Crime fiction and one of its subsets, the legal thriller, are historically the domain of white male writers, typically with white male lawyers as protagonists, and although this is beginning to change, it was the reality when this novel was written in the nineties. To situate a black British female lawyer protagonist in this milieu is a positive intervention and disruption of this male dominance. Williams is herself a lawyer and she writes with the very precise inside knowledge of the legal system's prevailing hierarchies and the struggles of someone with an authority that always seems to be challenged or under threat. She reconfigures the network of relationships between lawyers and the people they represent so that black womanhood holds the centre. Because it's written in the third person omniscient point of view, the other characters are also well delineated and deepened. We see them in action, and we get inside their heads to understand their motivations, thought processes and emotional responses. In real life we are really only privy to our own thoughts, but with the use of this point of view in fiction, we not only hear what people say, we also eavesdrop on what they think. In this novel, this panoramic strategy offers a richer, multilayered narrative.

The story Nicola Williams wrote is in many ways as relevant today as it was over two decades ago. It shows us, through the centralizing of one woman's story, how the triple intersections of colour, class and gender inform and complicate the battle to achieve in our society. Williams herself has risen to impressive

heights as a lawyer in the intervening years and is currently the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the British Armed Forces. Her novel gives us insight into the tenacity that would have been necessary to achieve this level of professional success. The novel makes the case that black British writers, like all other demographics, need to be published in all genres, and that a good story, well told, is imperative, but that fiction has the potential to achieve so much more in the telling. *Without Prejudice* offers us a version of black female achievement that is essential to attaining and inspiring a more meritocratic nation.

Chapter One

Ray Willis was getting impatient.

No, he thought, make that very pissed off.

He took a long drag on his nineteenth cigarette of the day, then quickly searched his pockets looking for the Lexigram that had been delivered last night. The now crumpled piece of paper confirmed what he already knew – that he should be at the Crown Court at 9.30 a.m., an hour before his case was to be heard, so that he could have a conference with his barrister. Someone from the solicitors' office should be there too. Well, he was here, and so was his brief, but there was no one from the office, and they were local too. Just what he needed; some student who had been given the file the night before by an overworked solicitor and hadn't bothered to read it until this morning. Now they were making up for lost time – on his time.

He looked at his watch again. Ten o'clock. Half an hour wasted, and he needed all the time he could get, especially as he hadn't turned up for the last conference at his barrister's Chambers. He

stuffed out his cigarette on top of the others he had smoked in the last half-hour, pushing it right down into the pile.

‘That’s the last time I’m going on fucking legal aid,’ he said aloud, and walked towards the door. As he touched the handle it swung open, and he looked directly into the eyes of the tall woman barrister who was to represent him.

‘Jesus, Ray! How can you breathe in here?’ she said as she looked past him into the smoke-filled room.

‘Never mind that. What the fuck’s going on? I’ve got better things to do with my time, you know.’

Her smile faded instantly. ‘Don’t speak to me like that. I was here waiting for you this morning. In fact, I also seem to remember waiting for you last week on Tuesday; I had something better to do with my time *then*. If you have a problem with your solicitors, take it up with them, not me.’

Ray looked at her. She was the only woman, ever, who would look him in the eye and speak to him that way. But then, while he couldn’t do anything to her, she could do a lot for him. He already had a string of previous convictions when he became one of her first clients, and, although she hadn’t got him off everything, her record was good enough – and his bad enough – for him to insist that he would only be represented by her. He didn’t like the taste of humble pie, but she was the only thing standing between him and a prison sentence. He couldn’t afford to get on her bad side as well.

‘OK, OK. Sorry. But you know who we’ve got – Shervington!’ Ray lit his second-last Marlboro, and took two quick drags. ‘Fucking bastard must have been rubbing his hands when he saw

my name. He knows my face. That shit will send me down for sure.’ He looked at his watch again. Five after. ‘Look, can’t we get started?’

The barrister looked at him. In the six years or so since she had been representing him, she had never seen him so nervous. At twenty-eight, Ray Willis had the kind of hard-man reputation that made older seasoned criminals think of him as an equal. He had stared down worse than Shervington before. She found herself wondering whether he had, in fact, committed the offence, then put that thought out of her mind. She remembered what her pupil-master had told her, fresh out of law school, in that year between passing the Bar exams and being ‘let loose on the public’, as he put it: ‘First rule of criminal defence: if your lay client tells you he’s pleading not guilty, don’t go behind that. If all the evidence indicates that he did it, or if his defence sounds like a pack of lies, then you can advise him as his counsel what you think his chances are. But it doesn’t matter if *you* think he’s guilty. You’re not judge and jury. Unless he actually tells you he’s guilty, you’ll never know for sure, and not even then.’

She assessed the present situation quickly. ‘Look, I’ve rung Hatton’s. Your solicitors don’t know where the clerk is. It’s not Brendan or Terry or one of their regulars; they would have been here by now. I’ve already spoken to the usher in Court Four; she says they’re running late, so we’ve got time. If we need any more, I’ll apply for it in open court.’

He half turned away from her. She could sense frustration and real fear coming from him, which was unusual. She put her hand on his arm. ‘Don’t worry, Ray, we’re not going to rush this. You

know the routine; I can see you without a solicitor present if you sign the back of my brief, stating you've agreed to this.'

'OK, OK, let's just get on with it,' said Ray, stepping back into the smoke-filled interview room.

But she was already opening the door of the adjoining room. 'No, not in there. I'm trying to give up.'

'Since when?' he asked as he followed her.

'Since New Year – three months now.' She carefully lowered her wig, notebook and Archbold, the criminal lawyers' bible, on to the table. It was a pain to carry around. It wouldn't normally be needed in a case as apparently straightforward as Ray's but if it was anything like the man himself, appearances were deceptive. Looking at him in his beautifully cut and obviously expensive black wool suit and silk tie, his blond hair well cut and neatly combed, he looked every inch the successful young professional instead of the successful young professional criminal, someone who had seen the inside of every Juvenile, Magistrates' and Crown Court in London since he was fourteen, and a few prisons too.

'So,' she said, opening up the rolled bundle of papers tied with red ribbon, 'according to this you were caught with eight ounces of cannabis in the boot of your car and you want to plead not guilty.' She looked meaningfully at him. 'Since you haven't kept your appointments with either your solicitors or me, I don't know anything more than that.'

Ray looked away and reflexively reached into his inside pocket for his Marlboros.

'Mind if I smoke? Just the one,' he added quickly, seeing the look of displeasure on her face.

‘If you think you need it,’ she said, pushing her chair back from the table as she spoke. Truth was, the smell was making her wish, not for the first time, that she hadn’t given up. Especially now, when faced with trying to build a plausible defence from next to nothing. ‘I was surprised to see you up on a drugs case, Ray. This isn’t your style.’

Silence.

Shrugging, she turned to the papers before her. ‘The prosecution case says the police pulled you over in Maida Vale because there had been a spate of burglaries there recently.’ She looked down at the statement of PC Lambert, speed-reading it. ‘He asked you where you were going. You said, in an aggressive tone, “None of your fucking business.” Is that true?’

‘No.’

She looked up at him.

‘None of it?’

‘Look, first he asked me about the motor. “How come a criminal like you can afford this?” He hasn’t got *that* in his statement. Then he wanted me to wait while he checked to see whether it was stolen. Then he started to ask me what I was doing so far away from Peckham, where I was going. And he mentioned about the burglaries. I just said “It’s a free country” and asked him how long the check was going to take. See, I clocked him straight off; he used to be at Miller Street.’

‘*That* Lambert? Who arrested you quite a few times a couple of years ago?’

‘Same one. Anyone else, I *would* have told them to mind their own fucking business, and I would have called the solicitors on

the mobile as well. But he knew me, and I didn't want to get his back up. I knew the stuff was in the back and I didn't want him to start searching the car.'

'Hang on a minute.' She was writing furiously in her blue notebook, cross-referencing it with Lambert's statement. 'And then what happened?'

'He asked me if he could have a look in the car. His mate had come out of the Panda car by now but was standing just next to it, not up close. I didn't recognize him. Lambert had this smirk on his face, like he was just willing me to say no. And I knew if I did it would look like I had something to hide.'

'Which you did.'

'Well, I was hoping it was well hidden, because I didn't put it there.'

His barrister looked incredulous. 'You let someone put drugs in your car without watching what they were doing, or even knowing whether it was cannabis? Suppose it had been heroin? Or crack? You're too smart for that, Ray.'

'Well, I was doing a favour for someone, know what I mean? I knew they wouldn't do me wrong.'

'Who was it? Family?'

Ray instantly became defensive. 'I don't have to tell you that. You know I'm no grass. I got caught, so it's down to me. End of story.'

'OK, if that's the way you want it.' She paused, then looked at PC Lambert's statement again. 'It says here that no items connected with burglary were found, but in the boot they found the drugs. So where exactly was it hidden?'

Ray took a last long drag on his cigarette, then stubbed it out. ‘That’s just it. Fucking idiot must’ve just thrown it in, ’cos when I opened up the boot, there it was, bloody smiling up at me! I tried to explain it was just for my own use, but they charged me with possession with intent to supply. Look, it was a present. I was taking it home to smoke it there. I know it’s a lot, but that would have lasted me for a good long time. So many officers know me, I can’t afford to go around buying every time I feel like spliffing up. I thought he’d have had the sense to hide it better. I told him to try the most obvious place. But I didn’t think he’d make it *that* fucking obvious. Anyway, I didn’t think they’d stop a—’ Ray halted abruptly.

‘What? A white man in a nice car in Maida Vale?’

‘Yeah, that’s right.’ Although no one would describe him as a liberal, Ray looked embarrassed. She wondered why. After all, they both came from the same part of London. They both knew the way things were.

‘They probably wouldn’t have done, Ray, if you hadn’t been driving an M-reg BMW when you have no known income.’

‘Yeah, but you know how it is. My uncle’s in the trade.’

‘Yes, I know how it is. I’ve represented him too.’

Chapter Two

In the case of *Regina v Ray Willis*, the Crown was being represented, on this occasion, by Peter Fairfax. He spotted his opponent as soon as she walked, with grace and purpose, through the door of the Bar Mess.

‘Ah, Leanne, come and join me. Care for a cup of coffee?’

She smiled as she walked quickly towards the head of the long wooden table where Peter was sitting, and slid in beside him.

‘This is a nice surprise. I was just thinking about you.’

‘Nothing too terrible, I hope.’

‘Just something that you taught me. And it’s Lee, not Leanne, please. No one has called me Leanne since I finished pupillage – except my mother.’

Now it was Peter’s turn to smile.

‘I see you’re representing Willis. Again. And I’m prosecuting him. Again.’ He waved his prosecution brief. ‘Nice to know that, with all the changes at the Bar, there are still some things one can rely on.’

It was good to see a familiar face. Peter Fairfax had been

her pupil-master seven years ago, and as such was the man responsible for finishing off her training as a barrister. Although an able and experienced barrister, he was – unusually in the profession – more easygoing and less ambitious than his contemporaries, which probably accounted for the fact that, instead of doing murder trials at the Old Bailey, he was prosecuting a case far below his capabilities against someone more than ten years his junior. Having an independent private income had possibly blunted the edge of his ambition. He was one of the nicest practitioners she had come across since coming to the Bar. He was just what this case needed, a prosecutor, not a persecutor.

‘So, what can we do about this young man?’ Peter asked, somewhat rhetorically.

‘Well, I’ve taken instructions and my client has authorized me to discuss with you the possibility of a plea.’

‘What? To the whole thing? That will make a nice short morning. I can catch my daughter’s Sports Day today – she’s in the three-legged race.’

In spite of the seriousness of the subject, Lee could not help smiling. He was one of the few barristers willing to sacrifice work for anything remotely concerning family life. Perhaps that was why he still had one.

‘I’d like a short morning too, Peter, so if you’ll accept a plea to simple possession only, then we’ll both get what we want.’

Peter’s smile faded. ‘I’ll have to check with the CPS because they instruct me, as you know, but privately, Lee, this isn’t just a couple of joints in someone’s back pocket; this is eight ounces of

cannabis. Besides, the arresting officer really seems to have his teeth in this one.'

If what Ray Willis had said about PC Lambert was true, Lee wasn't in the least surprised. 'Yes, but that's why barristers prosecute the trials, Peter, not police officers, so we can look at the case objectively. You and I both know that eight ounces of cannabis is nothing to a regular user. It's cheaper to buy it in bulk, then smoke it over a period of months. Besides, where's the evidence of intent to supply? There were no scales, no Rizla papers, no small plastic bags to sell it on with. All you have to prove intent is the amount. It's unlikely you'll get a conviction on that alone, and even if you did, you know I'll appeal.'

'Well,' Peter said, draining his cup and getting up from the ornate table, 'I hear what you say. I, of course, remain neutral on the matter, but I'll convey your views to the CPS.' He looked at his watch. 'You'd better let the usher know what's going on. You know Shervington hates to be kept waiting.'

Ray was pacing nervously outside Court Four, smoking what must have been his thirtieth cigarette. He quickly stubbed it out as Lee approached.

'Well, what's happening?'

'The prosecutor's gone to take instructions. They should accept your plea, but you can never tell with the Crown Prosecution Service.' She took him over to one side. 'If it's no, Ray, what are you going to do?'

'I dunno.' He looked around. 'You know me, I always put me hands up for what I've done, but I wasn't going to supply no one.'

Trouble is, if I plead not guilty in front of Shervington and I'm convicted, I'll go to prison for sure.'

'You could go to prison on a plea anyway, Ray. This is a lot of cannabis.'

'It *is* a lot . . .' Ray's voice trailed off.

Not for the first time, Lee wondered what the hell was going on.

'It's up to you, Ray,' she said, 'but if what you've told me is the truth, I would advise you to plead not guilty. You've done a lot of things in the past, but supplying drugs isn't one of them. Besides, there's no evidence of intent to supply. Of course, there are no guarantees; a jury could convict you. If so, we'll appeal. But the final decision is yours.'

Ray looked at her, and for the first time in the six years she had known him, Lee saw the same look on his face that she had seen on the faces of many lay clients before – the look that said, 'You're my brief, you sort it all out, tell me what to do, how to plead.' And that she would not do. She would advise them, give them all the options; but ultimately the decision had to be theirs.

Ray took a deep breath, then exhaled loudly. 'Well, you've been all right for me up till now. OK, I'll go not guilty on the supplying.'

Lee nodded. 'Good. I think you've made the right decision. But hopefully it won't come to that. Ah, there he is now. I'll be back in a minute.'

She walked quickly over to Peter Fairfax as he entered the corridor, pushing the heavy wooden doors wide apart in front of him.

‘Well?’

‘Well,’ Peter began slowly, ‘Lambert isn’t happy, not happy at all. And the CPS aren’t too pleased either. But both of them had to agree that there was no evidence of intent to supply – except the amount of the drug which, I had to remind them, was not, in my professional opinion, enough in itself for a conviction on the count as it stands. So, your plea is accepted.’

‘Thank you. He’ll be pleased.’

‘I didn’t do it to please him. The man’s a criminal, don’t forget. But, as you said, most likely simple possession is all he would have been convicted of in any event.’

Lee took her horsehair wig, the mark of her profession, and placed it on her head, making sure it was straight. Of course he was a criminal, but who the hell cared about that?

‘Well, we’d better go in. No point in keeping Shervington waiting.’

His Honour Judge Shervington, QC, was living up to his well-deserved reputation.

‘*What* course of action have the prosecution taken in this case?’ he screeched in a thin, quavering voice.

‘Your Honour,’ Peter Fairfax repeated patiently, ‘the Crown have decided to accept the plea the defendant has just entered of not guilty to possession of herbal cannabis with intent to supply, but guilty to possession *simpliciter*.’

‘On what basis?’ the judge demanded.

‘On the basis, Your Honour, that there is no evidence, in my submission, to prove the necessary intent.’

Judges were supposed to be impartial and above the adversarial debate. Shervington, as expected, immediately got down into the ring, swinging wildly for Her Majesty.

‘Have the prosecution taken leave of their senses? This man was found with eight ounces of herbal cannabis in his vehicle. And you seriously suggest that there is insufficient evidence for possession with intent? I’ll have you know, Mr Fairfax, this is not the first time this young man has come before me. I believe you are usurping the jury’s function and duty to the public to try this case.’

Lee looked back at her client in the dock. Outwardly, he seemed calm – except, that is, for his knuckles which were white from gripping the brass rail of the dock.

‘Your Honour, I have no doubt that Raymond Willis is as well known to you as he is to me, but with all due respect, as a prosecutor, I submit that it is my function and duty to the public only to prosecute cases where there is prima facie evidence to secure a conviction on the indictment laid against the defendant. There is insufficient evidence to support the offence with which he was charged.’

Lee paid close attention to the proceedings. It was interesting to watch someone else argue with this judge for a change – prosecutors generally reached new levels of obsequiousness before him. Peter, however, although not disrespectful, was coming close to the line.

‘Thank you, Mr Fairfax,’ Shervington snapped. He turned to Lee. ‘Miss Mitchell, do you appear with instructions? I see there is no one behind you.’

Lee stood up. The judge was referring to her absent solicitor’s

clerk. They had been at court nearly two hours and still no one had turned up. She was not going to keep Ray waiting indefinitely for them.

‘Your Honour, I have made such inquiries as I can. I was told that someone was on their way but that was some considerable time ago. The defendant has agreed both to a conference and to representation if necessary in the absence of his solicitor, and has endorsed my brief to that effect. I did not wish to keep Your Honour waiting.’

‘Personally, if I represented this man I wouldn’t want to turn up either. It would be a rather nasty case of *déjà vu*. I take it you have no objections to the course proposed by the prosecution?’

‘None at all, Your Honour. My learned friend had very kindly indicated as much outside court.’

‘Your lack of objection doesn’t surprise me in the least.’ He turned again to Peter. ‘Mr Fairfax, if there is nothing I can do to dissuade you from this course, I shall ask the learned clerk to put the matter again. Of course,’ he continued, with a glint in his eye, ‘I still have to sentence the defendant. Is there a pre-sentence report ready?’

Lee rose to her feet again. ‘No, Your Honour. No pleas had been taken until today. If this matter is to be adjourned for the usual four-week period,’ Lee looked over to the court probation officer, a middle-aged, grey-haired man who nodded his assent to her estimate, ‘the question of bail arises.’

‘Miss Mitchell, I may as well tell you that I am not minded to give your client bail.’

‘As Your Honour knows, the Bail Act starts from the standpoint

that every defendant has a presumed right to bail unless the relevant exceptions apply. I am sure that Your Honour would not wish to be seen to be pre-judging this issue before you have heard my submissions on this point.’

From his expression, it was perfectly clear that that was precisely what Shervington was doing, but he was not going to risk being appealed. Instead, he turned his attention to Peter Fairfax.

‘Let us hear what the Crown have to say first. Mr Fairfax, I’m sure you have objections.’

‘Your Honour, it is clear that the defendant is not a man of good character, and the amount of the drug is, of course, of great concern. Nevertheless, it is a Class B drug, the defendant has turned up at court today and has never failed to answer his bail in the past, has no previous convictions for drugs, and—’

‘The man has been to prison in the past, Mr Fairfax!’

‘Your Honour is quite right but the Crown feel that, precisely because of this fact, the fear of prison, which is the main reason persons on bail abscond, would not have the same effect on this man.’

Lee held her breath. That was an argument that Shervington would not have countenanced for a second if she had put it forward for the defence, and Peter knew it. But put forward by the prosecution . . .

The silence stretched. Ray stood in the dock, hardly daring to breathe.

‘Very well,’ Shervington at last conceded with obvious ill will. ‘The defendant is granted bail on the following conditions . . .’

The conditions were onerous, as was to be expected, but Ray knew how lucky he was to be bailed at all, and even though there was no guarantee he would not be back in jail in four weeks' time, he was more than happy to agree to them.

As he stood there in the dock, white-faced and sweating, so unlike the Ray she knew, Lee wondered how long it would be before whatever shit he was involved in hit the fan.

A tall, slightly dishevelled figure ran up the stairs and burst through the doors opening on to the long corridor off which the courts were situated. Court Four, Court Four – where the hell was it? He hoped he wasn't late again. Getting legal experience during the holidays before going back to university was all very well, but personally he found the whole idea of criminal law distasteful. Most of his friends had jobs with City firms of Chancery Chambers, which was so much more genteel, not to mention financially rewarding, but he had ended up with some South London legal aid firm. And the clients! Not the sort of people he was used to mixing with socially. The only good thing about it was that he could tell his chums about his walk on the wild side when term resumed.

Ah, Court Four, there it was. On a row of seats outside the court lay a wig and gown, some papers and a copy of Archbold. Standing next to it were two people, a tall, immaculately dressed white man, probably in his late twenties, and a woman the same age or slightly older, also very well dressed, but black. They were smiling at each other and shaking hands. No one else

around, so that must be his case. What was the barrister's name?
Lee Mitchell.

He rushed up to them.

'Good morning, Mr Mitchell,' he said, interrupting their conversation. 'I'm Jonathan Earle, from the solicitors. I hope I'm not terribly late, but I can take instructions from your client,' he looked at Lee, 'straightaway. I see you didn't turn up for your conference, Ms . . . ?' His tone, which had been overly solicitous before, was now just a touch patronizing.

'What did you say your name was again?' Lee was amazed at how calmly she asked the question, but then this wasn't the first time this had happened to her.

'Mr Earle. Now, if we could just get—'

'I can't believe this,' Ray burst out. 'It's over. You're too fucking late, mate, and you never bothered to read the papers neither, did you?'

Really, Jonathan thought. The kind of people who were being allowed to practise at the Bar these days. Opening things up was all very well but this chap sounded more like a defendant, not a . . .

Suddenly the full enormity of his mistake dawned on him. He stood there, mouth agape, looking from the angry man to the even angrier woman.

'Ms . . . Ms Mitchell, I'm so very sorry. I had no idea. I just—'

'You just assumed that Mr Willis here was my counsel in this cannabis case,' Lee said, icy-calm. 'You did, I trust, read enough of the papers to know it was a drugs case?'

Jonathan started to say something but Lee waved her hand dismissively.

‘Please don’t say anything more.’ She turned to Ray. He was looking even more embarrassed than Jonathan Earle. ‘Ray, we’re done here. I’m glad it went well today. I’ll see you in four weeks’ time.’

With that, she gathered her things and left.

Chapter Three

Turning off from Fleet Street into the Temple, it never failed to amaze Lee how quiet it was compared to the surrounding streets. It was something that stirred both positive and negative feelings in her. Sometimes, especially on a summer afternoon, it was so beautifully calm and peaceful that she could not imagine working anywhere else.

She walked towards Middle Temple Hall. Outside it was a group of American tourists avidly listening to a portly man, who looked like a retired sergeant-major, regaling them with its history. As she passed she heard one of the group, an expensively dressed woman, say to a man, presumably her husband, ‘You hear that, Harold? This here hall is probably older than our country!’

Somehow, that seemed to exemplify the reverse side of the equation: the feeling that she didn’t and never could quite belong, no matter how long she practised at the Bar. When the hall was first built, there would have been no conception that a woman would practise at the English Bar, and the possibility that that

woman might be black would have been laughable. Some people still had problems with the concept now. And not only was she black, and a woman, but she hadn't gone to the 'right' school or university and, unlike her moneyed contemporaries, had had to find paying work part-time in the early years while she built up her practice.

But in many ways being an outsider was liberating; no one expected anything of you. It was also nothing new. Hearing her parents talk about what it was like for them when they first left Guyana for England nearly forty years ago, full of hope for the better life they were promised, Lee knew that nothing she had faced came close to the level of exclusion and disappointment they had experienced. When she precociously announced at ten that she wanted to be a lawyer, they were behind her all the way, making sure that at least one of them attended every parent/teacher's evening just to let the teachers know that 'we're watching them good', as her father used to say. And when the school's careers teacher expressed her belief that any kind of legal work, let alone that of a barrister, was an unsuitable and unrealistic ambition for any black girl at the comprehensive, her parents would have none of it.

Thinking back to her Call Night, Lee knew that of all the proud parents, relatives and friends there, hers must have been the proudest. Even her father, sick as he was, smiled fit to burst. She was particularly glad that he had lived long enough to see that.

Lee narrowly avoided colliding with a clerk laden with documents. Four in the afternoon in the Temple was always a busy

time, what with barristers coming back from court, couriers delivering briefs from solicitors' offices, and junior clerks hurrying to the post office or to the Document Exchange. In a busy Chambers like Maple Court, the level of activity in the Clerks' Room would reach a kind of controlled frenzy between four and six.

As soon as she walked in, Lee could tell how stressed the clerks were because both of them were smoking furiously, filling the room with a nicotine haze. She liked her Chambers, but she hated to be around when it was like this, particularly now that she was trying to give up smoking. She wondered whether Tom, the senior clerk, who was responsible for keeping the professional lives of the twenty-two barristers who comprised Chambers on track and who was also responsible for hiring junior clerks, had an unwritten rule that any successful applicant 'must be a smoker, or be willing to learn'. Certainly, the only way any of them could give up would be if they both did it together.

'I'm back,' she said, trying to make her voice heard above the din.

She got grunts from Dean the junior clerk, and a wave from Tom, who in his bespoke tailored suit and with his world-weary air resembled an older version of Bryan Ferry.

'Did you hear about the baby Keeley case?' Tom asked.

'How long did he get?' Lee put down her bag. The Keeley case, involving the systematic sexual abuse and eventual murder of an eighteen-month-old girl by her stepfather, had been going on for months, and the depressing details were reported daily in the press and nightly on the evening news. It was, on any view, one of the most open and shut cases in recent years.

‘George Amery got him off.’

Seasoned lawyer though she was, Lee’s jaw dropped.

Tom held up the latest edition of the *Evening Standard*. ‘Read it and weep,’ he said.

The headlines screamed, ‘KEELELY MAN GOES FREE’, and underneath, in slightly smaller type, ‘“The Rottweiler” Bites Again’. There was a colour picture of both the acquitted man and Amery, the former looking stunned, as if he could not believe his luck, the latter looking extremely pleased with himself. Lee threw the paper down in disgust.

‘That man would represent anyone.’

‘Yes, he does. But he’s a fantastic lawyer, one of the best. And anyway, isn’t that what we’re here for, Miss Mitchell? To represent anyone who needs it?’ Tom looked at her. They had been down this road before.

Lee sighed. Of course everyone was entitled to a defence, but George Amery specialized in doing the cases no one else would touch; not, she suspected, for any great love of the law but solely for the notoriety and media attention it brought him.

‘How did he manage to pull it off?’ she asked.

‘Legal technicality. You know George; if there is one, he’ll find it.’ There was something that sounded suspiciously like admiration in Tom’s voice. Results, that was all he was interested in. As senior clerk, he received ten per cent of the total annual earnings of Chambers. Lee was under no illusions about him, she knew she was only tolerated because the clients kept coming back. And a little local colour around Chambers did not hurt their image either.

Suddenly, Tom seemed to recall that one of his barristers had been involved in a case, too.

‘How did it go with Willis?’ he asked.

‘He pleaded,’ Lee answered. She was looking through the message book as she spoke. ‘Goes to show there’s a first time for everything.’

‘Well, maybe he was bang to rights.’

‘You know pleading’s not his style, Tom. Look how long I’ve been representing him. He’s had some good results with me, too. I think he was protecting someone, plus Shervington scared the shit out of him.’

‘Yeah, he would me, too,’ said Tom, taking another drag on his cigarette and gulping down a mouthful of black coffee. ‘You’ve had two messages. Your mother rang, and also some man – Cox, I think – to remind you about tonight.’ Tom looked at her expectantly. Lee was aware of Dean looking too. That was the thing she disliked most about Chambers, everyone wanted to know everything about everyone else, especially Tom, who was a true believer in the maxim ‘knowledge is power’. It was a veritable gossip factory. Not that there was anything secret about this, she was only going to speak at her old school, but sometimes it was nice to be able to keep something to yourself.

‘Thanks, Tom.’ She wasn’t going to elaborate. ‘Anything in for tomorrow?’

‘Er, no. We thought you were an effective trial. Oh, I nearly forgot. You know in the last Chambers meeting you said you would take a pupil? We’ve got someone who’s interested in crime – a woman, too. Anne-Marie Green.’

‘I’ve got nothing against a male pupil, Tom. Anne-Marie Green – don’t think I saw her.’

‘You didn’t. She came in twice when you were up on that long affray trial in Manchester. But you did say you would help out by taking her.’

‘Yeah, yeah. I would have liked to have seen her first, but OK. Do you have her CV?’

‘There’s a copy on your shelf,’ said Tom, pointing to rows of shelving near the door.

‘Thanks,’ Lee said, picking it up as she walked towards the door. ‘Oh, by the way, is Giles around?’

Silence. Dean, the seventeen-year-old junior clerk, was trying not to laugh and not succeeding very well. Tom looked at him reprovingly before clearing his throat to speak. ‘Mr Townsend’s not in, Miss Mitchell. Er, you know he wasn’t appointed.’

‘No, I didn’t.’ Lee was not in the least surprised. Her Head of Chambers had applied twice before to become Queen’s Counsel, an appointment which would have marked him out as a success among his peers, many of whom had already achieved that hallowed status. Unfortunately, in spite of his seniority, his ambition was not matched by either his practice or his brains. ‘I’ll just ring the solicitors about today’s result, then I’ll be going.’ And with that she left for her room.

Lee’s room, which she shared with Mary Fisher, another member of Chambers, was just like the others in her set: beautifully, and very expensively, decorated in a traditional, rather old-fashioned way. However, both she and Mary had added their own personal touches; Mary, with a set of silver-framed photographs

of her three children, all of whom had hair as red as their mother's, and Lee with a small carving of an African mother and child, and a photograph of her father taken when he was still healthy and vital. Lee often wondered whether Mary was as surprised as she was how well they got on together. After all, their backgrounds could not have been more different. Probably the only thing capable of embarrassing Mary was any reference to her titled background, the confidence she had was something bred in the bone – unlike her own, which had been diligently and painfully acquired.

Apart from the fact that she was very easy to get along with, Lee liked sharing with Mary because neither of them were around much. Since the birth of her third child, Mary had decided to work from home a lot more, only coming into Chambers once or twice a week. Today was one of her rare days in, which was no bad thing. She could always be counted on to raise your spirits. She was on the phone, her head bobbing up and down as she chatted animatedly to someone, presumably her solicitor, about the result of some long-running landlord and tenant case she had just completed. You could put your ear to the ground and virtually hear, all over the Temple, barristers taking part in the same time-honoured ritual. It was as important as the decision in the case itself: smoothing ruffled feathers if the result was worse than expected, or accepting praise, not too modestly, if it was a win, and looking forward to being sent more cases by a grateful firm.

Today, it seemed Mary fell into the latter category. No false modesty for her. She had won a difficult, lengthy case, and now

that she was on the mountaintop she was clearly enjoying the view.

Lee sat behind her desk and rang Brendan Donnelly at Hutton's with her own good news about Ray Willis.

'Ray rang me outside court,' Brendan told her. 'Said he didn't want to ring inside in case the judge changed his mind. I don't know how you managed to get him bail. He always thought you were good, now he thinks you can walk on water.'

'Hard work and preparation, as usual, Brendan.' Lee paused. 'But I think there's more to this than meets the eye. You know Ray, he's not into drugs and I'd never seen him so rattled about anything – and it's not as if he hasn't been inside before.'

'Yeah, well, we'll never know for sure unless he tells us and he's not likely to if someone else is involved. He did tell me about that arrogant Oxford bastard. I can't apologize enough, Lee. We won't be using him again.'

'He'd better give me a wide berth. Next time he won't get off so lightly.' Suddenly Lee couldn't stand it any more. She scrambled around in her handbag until she found some chewing gum. She put one in her mouth but it wasn't the same. 'Got to go now, Brendan. I've got something to do this evening.'

'OK – hey, before you go,' Brendan paused for emphasis, 'you know the Omartian case?' When the Keeley case had not been on the front pages, it was the fast-living, high-spending Omartians. Theirs was one of the most noteworthy cases in recent memory.

'No, Brendan, never heard of it.'

Brendan gave a deep chuckle. 'The youngest one came in to

see me. He's Tail-End Charlie in all this, but from what he tells me, he may actually have a defence. He's still deciding whether to formally instruct us, but if he does, do you want it?'

Barristers far senior to her would turn cartwheels for a brief like that. Lee was no different, but she was damned if she would show it.

'Well,' she said slowly, 'you know I'm pretty busy,' which was the truth.

'Come off it, Lee. No one's too busy for a case like this. Besides, I reckon it won't be heard until this time next year at the earliest. Look, nothing's firm as yet, but if you don't want it—'

'Yes I do,' she interrupted quickly.

'Good. Well, I'll speak to you about it again when I know what the position is. Have a good evening, Lee.' Click.

Lee put the telephone down slowly and sat for several minutes just looking at it, until she saw Mary eyeing her with a grin. Mary reached under her desk and took out a bottle of Bollinger champagne. She opened it and filled two styrofoam cups.

Lee laughed. 'You know, if we both carry on winning our cases we'd better get some decent glasses.'

'Who said you need to win to drink champagne? It's also the best way to drown your sorrows. I know. Mind you,' she said downing hers in one, 'winning makes it taste better.'

'Maybe we should give some to Giles,' said Lee, only half serious.

'I don't know why he applied. All ambition, no balls. But who knows? Maybe fourth time lucky next year, because I'm sure he'll try again. Anyway,' Mary poured herself another cup, 'cheers.'