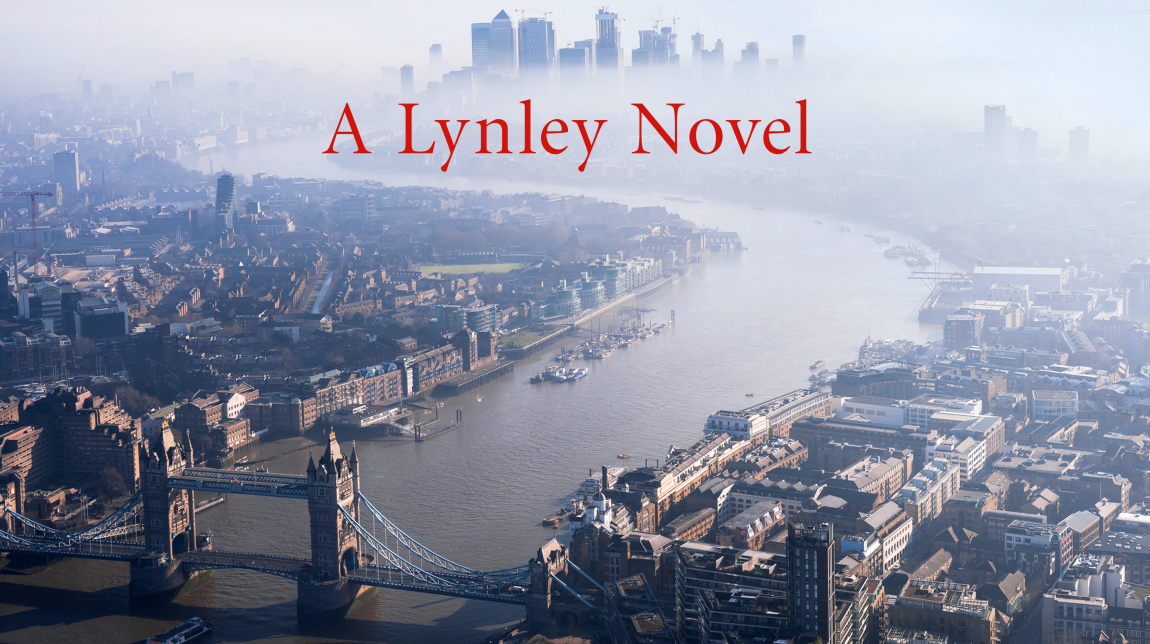
'SHE'S BRILLIANT'
GUARDIAN

elizabeth george

SOMETHING TO HIDE

A Lynley Novel



Something To Hide

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ELIZABETH GEORGE

Something To Hide

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For those who suffer,
Those who endure,
And those who fight

For the human soul is virtually indestructible,
And its ability to rise from the ashes
Remains as long as the body draws breath.
Alice Miller
For Your Own Good

PART I

21 JULY

Westminster
Central London

Deborah St James came at Sanctuary Buildings by way of Parliament Square on one of the hottest days of what had so far been a blazingly hot summer. She'd been asked to meet with one of the undersecretaries at the Department for Education as well as the head of the NHS. 'We'd like to talk you about a project,' she'd been told. 'Are you available to take something on?'

She was. She'd been casting round for a project since the publication of *London Voices* four months earlier, an undertaking that she'd spent the last several years putting together. So she was happy to attend a meeting that might turn into a new project although she couldn't imagine what sort of photography the Department for Education in conjunction with the NHS might have in mind.

She approached a guard at the door with her identification in hand. However, he wasn't so much interested in that as was he interested in the contents of her capacious bag. He told her that her mobile phone was fine but she was going to have to prove that her digital camera actually was a camera. Deborah obliged by taking his picture. She showed it to him. He waved her towards the door. He said, just as she was about to enter, 'Delete that, though. I look like crap.'

At the reception desk, she asked for Dominique Shaw. Deborah St James here to speak with the undersecretary for the school system, she added.

After a discreetly murmured phone call, she was handed a lanyard with VISITOR printed on the card that hung from it. Meeting Room 4, she was told. Floor 2. Turn to the right if she chose the lift. Turn to the left if she chose the stairs. She went for the stairs.

When she arrived at Meeting Room 4, though, she assumed she'd

been given the wrong number. Five people sat round a polished conference table, not the two she'd been led to believe wished to meet her. Three floor fans were trying heroically to mitigate the temperature in the room. They were only creating something of a scirocco.

A woman rose from the end of the table and came towards her, hand extended. She was smartly dressed in a manner that shouted 'government official', and she was decorated with overlarge rimless spectacles and gold earrings the size of golf balls. She was Dominique Shaw, she said, Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for the School System. She introduced the others so quickly that for the most part, Deborah only caught their positions: the head of the NHS, a representative from Barnardo's, the founder of something called Orchid House, and a woman with the name Narissa whose surname Deborah didn't catch. They were a diverse group: one was Black, one looked Korean, Dominique Shaw was white, and the woman called Narissa appeared to be mixed race.

'Please.' Dominique Shaw indicated an empty chair next to the representative from Barnardos.

Deborah sat. She was surprised to see a copy of *London Voices* in front of each of the people who were there. Her first thought was that the book was causing difficulties somehow, that she had created a volume that had turned out to be politically, socially or culturally incorrect, although she couldn't imagine how any of that would involve the Department for Education. For the book comprised portraits of Londoners taken over a period of three years. Each portrait was accompanied by some of the subject's words recorded by Deborah during the photographic session. Included among the portraits were at least two dozen of the increasingly large homeless population, people of all ages and races and nationalities who ended up sleeping in doorways along the Strand, stretched out in the subways beneath Park Lane, curled next to wheelie bins – and sometimes inside them – and behind hotels like the Savoy and the Dorchester. These parts of the book didn't deliver London as the glamorous global city it made itself out to be.

She demurred on the offer of coffee or tea, but happily accepted tepid water from a glass jug on the table. She waited for someone to bring up the subject of the meeting – preferably clarification on the topic of what on earth she was doing there – and once Deborah had her water, as well as her own completely unnecessary copy of

London Voices that Dominique Shaw passed to her, the undersecretary for schools began to elucidate.

She said, 'It was Mr Oh who brought your book to my attention,' with a nod at the man from Barnardo's. 'It's impressive. I've been wondering, though . . .' She seemed to cull through various options of what she was wondering while outside and below the window what sounded like a lorry with a very bad transmission screeched in the street. Shaw glanced at the window, frowned, then went on. 'How did you manage it?'

Deborah wasn't sure what Dominique Shaw meant. She looked at the cover of the book for a moment. The publisher had chosen an inoffensive image: one of the many elderly people who regularly fed the birds in St James's Park. Peaked cap on his head, he was standing on the bridge over the pond, hand extended, bird on his palm. It was his deeply lined cheeks that had interested her, how the lines mapped the distance from the eyes to his lips, which were very chapped. The photograph wasn't one she would have chosen for the cover of the book, but she understood the reasoning behind it. One *did* want the prospective buyer to pick it up and open it. A photo of someone sleeping rough in the Strand wasn't likely to be as effective.

Deborah said, 'D'you mean getting people to pose? I did ask them. I told them I wanted to make a portrait and, to be honest, most people are willing to have their picture taken if they're approached and given the reason. Not everyone, of course. There were some people who said no, absolutely not. A few unpleasant remarks here and there but one can't be put off by that. Those who were happy to let me shoot them where they were . . . ? If they had an address, I sent them a copy of the photo I chose to use in the book.'

'And what they said to you.' Mr Oh was speaking. 'Their remarks that you've included . . . ?'

'How did you get them to talk to you like this?' the woman Narissa asked.

'Oh. Right.' Deborah opened the book and leafed through a few of the pages as she spoke. 'The thing about taking someone's photograph is to get them not to think about the fact that I'm taking their photograph. People stiffen up in front of a camera. It's human nature. They think they're supposed to pose and suddenly, they're not who they really are. So the photographer has to devise a way

to catch them in a moment when they . . . I suppose you'd say in a moment when they reveal themselves. Every photographer has to do this. It's easy enough if I can catch them unaware of being photographed in the first place. But for something like this – I mean for a book or for any formal portrait, really – one can't do that. So most photographers talk to them as they shoot.'

'Tell them to relax, tell them to smile, tell them what?' Dominique Shaw asked.

Deborah saw how the undersecretary had misunderstood her explanation. She said, 'I don't tell them anything. I ask them to tell me. I listen to them and I respond and they carry on. For this' – she indicated the book – 'I asked them to tell me about their experiences in London, about how they felt about living in London, about what London feels like for them, about the place where the picture was taken. Naturally, everyone had a different answer. It was the exploration of the answer that ended up giving me the moments I was looking for.'

The founder of Orchid House said, 'Wha's this, then? D'you think you have a special gift for getting people to talk to you?'

Deborah smiled as she shook her head. 'Lord, no. I'm completely inarticulate if the subject veers away from photography, dogs, or cats. I *can* do gardening, I suppose, but only if it deals with weeding and only if I don't have to identify the weed. For this' – again she indicated the book – 'I settled on the same questions in advance and I asked them as I took the pictures. Then we went from there. I built on what they gave me as answers. Whenever people hit on the subject that triggers them, their faces alter.'

'And that's when you take the picture?'

'No, no. That's what I'm looking for, but I take the pictures all along. For a book like this . . . I culled through . . . I don't know . . . p'rhaps three thousand portraits?'

There was a silence round the table. Glances were exchanged. Deborah's conclusion was that she certainly hadn't been called here for reasons to do with *London Voices*, but she still couldn't work out what they wanted with her. Finally, the undersecretary spoke.

'Well, you've done quite a job with the book,' she said. 'Congratulations. We have a project we'd like to talk to you about.'

'Something to do with education?' Deborah asked.

'Yes. But I daresay not in the way you might be thinking of it.'

Mayville Estate
Dalston
North-east London

Tanimola Bankole had been clinging to the hope that the fourth straight week of misery-inducing summer heat would disrupt his father's train of thought, which had been steaming along the railway track of Tani's irresponsibility for the last thirty-seven minutes. This wasn't a new subject for Abeo Bankole. Tani's father was fully capable of banging on, both in English and in his native Yoruba, for forty-five minutes and he'd done just that on more than one occasion. He saw it as his paternal obligation to make certain Tani fully took up the mantle of manhood as defined by Abeo, and Tani could do this only by embracing all of manhood's attendant duties, also as defined by Abeo. At the same time he saw it as Tani's filial obligation to listen to, to remember, and to obey his father in all things. The first of the three, Tani generally managed. It was the second and third that caused him trouble.

On this particular day, Tani couldn't argue against a single point his father was making. He *was* lucky to have regular work made available to him by virtue of being the son of Abeo Bankole, proprietor of Into Africa Groceries Etc as well as a butcher's shop and a fishmonger's stall. He *was* privileged that his father allowed him to keep one-eighth of his wages for his personal use instead of depositing all of them into the family pot. He *did* enjoy three meals each day provided for him by his mother. His laundry *was* delivered to his bedroom spotlessly clean and perfectly ironed. Et cetera, et cetera, and blah blah blah. Instead of taking any kind of notice of the waves of heat rising from the pavement, of the trees – where there were any in this part of town – losing their leaves far too early into the year, of the remaining ice in the fish stalls in Ridley Road Market melting so quickly that the air was thick with the smell of hake and snapper and mackerel, of the meat in the butchers' stalls sending forth a stench of blood from the simmering organs of sheep and cows, of the fruit and veg having to be sold at discount before they rotted, Abeo merely strode onward in the direction of Mayville Estate, oblivious of everything save Tani's failure to arrive at work on time.

Tani was completely at fault. His father said nothing that wasn't

true. Tani *couldn't* keep his mind on what he was supposed to be doing. Tani did *not* put his family first. Tani *did* continually forget who he was. So he didn't say anything in his own defence. Instead, he thought of Sophie Franklin.

There was much to think of: Sophie's gorgeous skin; her soft, cropped hair; her smooth-as-silk legs and glorious ankles; her luscious breasts; her lips and her tongue and all the rest of her . . . Of *course* he was completely irresponsible. When he was with Sophie, how could he be anything else?

His father might have understood this. Although he was sixty-two, he'd been young once. But there was absolutely *no* way that Tani was about to tell him about Sophie. The fact that she was not Nigerian was only one of the reasons Abeo Bankole would have a stroke there on the pavement if he knew of Tani's relationship with her. The other was sex with Sophie, the very fact of which was more than Abeo would ever be able to take in calmly.

So Tani had been late to work at Into Africa Groceries Etc. He'd been so late, in fact, that the daily restocking of shelves was in progress when he'd finally arrived. This restocking – along with reordering and general clean-up – was Tani's job once his college duties had been fulfilled each day, and the only other employee of Into Africa, Zaid, was not intended to do anything but direct customers to whatever they were looking for and otherwise to work the till. Zaid wasn't happy to be doing everything on this particular day. He'd expressed this unhappiness via mobile to Abeo just along the way in the butcher's shop.

Tani had rushed dutifully to take over the restocking of the shelves when he finally arrived. But Zaid had done the general clean-up, and he cast a number of baleful looks in Tani's direction before Abeo walked in and told Tani he was to come with him.

Tani had understood he was in for it. But he recognised that this might be a very good opportunity for him to put his father in the picture as to Tani's future. He hated having to work in either of his father's two shops, *or* the fishmonger's stall, and he hated even more that he was intended to take over the running of Into Africa Groceries Etc. as soon as he finished his catering course at sixth-form college. *This* was not for him. Truth about it? This was bollocks. What he meant to do was to head to uni for a degree in business and in no one's dream world was he going to waste that degree by taking

employment in a shop. Abeo could call upon one or more of the Bankole cousins for a shop manager. Of course, that would mean allowing a family member from Peckham into the constricted life Abeo had designed for his wife and his offspring in north-east London, and Abeo wouldn't like that. But Tani wasn't going to give him a choice. He meant to have the life he wanted.

The walk to Mayville Estate after work hours followed a zigzag pattern north through the streets. Late afternoon and there were pedestrians and cars and buses and bicycles everywhere as inhabitants of the area headed home. Among a very few Nigerians in this part of town, in a mixed-race community that was transitioning from African to West Indian, the Bankoles lived on the grounds of Mayville Estate in Bronte House, a building that comprised five floors of the undecorated London brick that was ubiquitous on the housing estate. The structure had the distinction of being directly across the lane from an asphalt play area, shaded from the scorching sun by enormous London plane trees. There were basketball hoops and goal posts at either end of it, and it was fenced to keep children chasing balls from going into the street.

Concrete steps led up to the doors of the ground-floor flats in Bronte House while outdoor corridors marked the route to those on the upper four storeys, which were accessed by a stairway or a lift. Nearly every door was open in the futile hope of catching a breeze that was, at least for now, non-existent. So from gaping windows television noises and dance music along with rap issued forth, accompanied by the fragrance of a multitude of meals being prepared.

Inside the Bankole flat, Tani felt blanketed by a pall of nearly liquid air that forced him to squint against his own sweat. There were fans running, but they did nothing to mitigate the roasting air. They merely moved it around like sluggish swamp water. One could breathe, but it wasn't pleasant to do so.

Tani caught the scent almost at once, and he glanced at his father. Pa's expression showed that he wasn't pleased.

It was Monifa Bankole's job to anticipate many things. At this time of day, she was to anticipate not only the hour that her husband would walk into the flat but also the meal that her husband would prefer. He usually told her neither. In his head they had been married for twenty years, so he should not have to broadcast

information to her like a newlywed. During their first years together, he'd made her well aware of many things, among them his requirement that his tea be ready no more than ten minutes after his return from the day's labour. This day, Tani saw, things were looking good for the *time* of tea if not for the substance. His sister Simisola was laying the table for all of them, which meant the meal was imminent.

Simi bobbed a hello instead of speaking, but she shot Tani a grin when he said, 'You baffed up cos your boyfriend's coming to tea, Squeak?' She quickly covered her grin with her hand. This hid the appealing little gap between her front teeth but it did nothing to stifle her giggle. She was eight years old, ten years Tani's junior. His principal interaction with her was defined by teasing.

'I don't *have* a boyfriend,' she declared.

'No? Why?' he asked her. 'In Nigeria you'd be married by now.'

'Would not!' she said.

'Would too. Tha's what happens, innit, Pa.'

Abeo ignored him to say to Simi, 'Tell your mother we are home,' as if this were necessary.

The girl swirled round, danced past one of the nearly useless fans, and called out, 'Mummy! They're here!' And then to her father and brother, and just as her mother would, 'Sit, sit, sit. You want a beer, Papa? Tani?'

'Water for him,' Abeo said.

Simi shot Tanimola a look and swirled round again. It came to Tani that she was doing all the swirling in order to show off a skirt. It was an old one, looking like an Oxfam special, but she'd decorated it with sequins and sparkles, and her headband – from which her short dark hair sprang up in twists – she had decorated as well. It sported more sequins, and she'd added a feather. She dashed into the kitchen, nearly knocking into their mother, who was emerging with the *gbegiri* soup Tani had smelled. Steam rose from it, fogging her specs and beading moisture on Monifa's forehead and cheeks.

He couldn't imagine even trying *gbegiri* soup in this heat, but he knew what mentioning that would trigger. Abeo would embark upon another saga of how things were when *he* was a boy. He'd been in England for forty of his sixty-two years, but when he spoke of his native Nigeria, one would think he'd arrived at Heathrow only last week. How things were 'back home' had long been his

preferred topic, whether he was holding forth about the schools, the living conditions, the weather, or the customs . . . all of which seemed to exist in a fantasy African homeland born from watching *Black Panther* at least five times. It was Pa's favourite film.

As Monifa placed the serving bowl in the centre of the table, Abeo frowned. 'This is not *efo riro*,' he said.

'In this heat, I worried,' Monifa said. 'The chicken. The meat. We had none here, just a bit of beef. And I wondered how fresh could the other meats stay if I bought them in the market. So I thought *gbegiri* soup might be wiser.'

He looked at her. 'You have made no rice, Monifa?'

'Here, Papa!' Simi had reappeared with the beer. She had a frosty can in one hand and a frosty glass in the other, and she said, 'It feels *so* cool. Feel how cool it is, Papa. C'n I have some? Just a sip?'

'You can*not*,' her mother said. 'Sit. I am serving the food. I am sorry about the rice, Abeo.'

Simi said, 'But I've not got Tani's water yet, Mummy.'

Abeo said sharply, 'Do as your mother tells you, Simisola.'

Simi did so, casting an 'I'm sorry' look at Tani, who shrugged.

She ducked her hands beneath the table and cast a look at Tani, who gave her a wink. She cast one at her mother, who kept her gaze on Abeo. After a long moment of observing Monifa, he gave the sharp nod that indicated his wife could begin serving.

He said to Monifa, 'Your son failed to show up at work on schedule once again. He was able to give the shop only thirty minutes of his valuable time. Zaid had to do nearly everything at closing, and he was not pleased.' And then he said to Tani, 'Where were you that you failed in your responsibilities?'

Monifa murmured, 'Abeo . . . ? Perhaps later you and Tani—?'

'This, what I speak of, is not your concern,' Abeo cut in. 'Have you made *eba*? Yes? Simisola, bring it from the kitchen.'

Monifa spooned a large portion of *gbegiri* soup on to a rimmed plate. She passed it to Abeo. She scooped up more and gave it to Tani.

In a moment, Simi emerged from the kitchen with a large platter of *eba*. To accompany the swallows and in a bow to 'being English', she'd tucked under her arm a bottle of brown sauce. She placed this in front of Abeo and returned to her seat. Monifa served her last, as was their custom.

They ate in silence. Noise from outdoors along with the smacking

of lips and swallowing of food was the only sound. Halfway through his meal, Abeo paused, shoved back his chair and performed what Tani thought of as his father's nightly ritual. He blew his nose mightily into a paper napkin, balled this up, and tossed it to the floor. He told Simi to bring him another. Monifa rose to do this herself, but Abeo said, 'Sit, Monifa. You are not Simi.' Simi scampered off, returning moments later with an ancient tea towel so faded that it was impossible to discern which royal marriage was being celebrated on it. She said to her father, 'I couldn't find any but there's this. An' it will work, won't it, Papa?'

He took it from her and used it on his face. He placed it on the table and looked at them. He said, 'I have news.'

Instantly, they all became statues.

'What kind of news?' Monifa asked.

'Things have been settled well,' was his reply.

Tani saw his mother shoot a glance in his direction. Her expression alone was a trigger for his anxiety.

'It's taken many months,' Abeo said. 'The cost has been more than I expected. We start at ten cows. *Ten* of them. So I ask can she breed if I am to pay ten cows for her? *He* says she is one of twelve offspring, three of whom are already producing. Thus she comes of breeding stock. That is of no account, I tell him. Just because her mother and siblings have bred so well, this does not mean *she* will do the same. So I ask for a guarantee. Ten cows and there is no guarantee? I say this to him. He says Pah! What sort of man asks another for a guarantee? I say A man who knows what is important. We go back and forth and in the end, he says he will settle for six cows. I say it's still too much. He says Then she can stay here because I have other options. Options, hah. I tell him I know he bluffs. But the time is right, her age is right, she will not last long if he puts the word out. So I agree, and the thing is settled.'

Monifa had lowered her gaze to her plate and had not lifted it again during Abeo's speech. Simi had stopped chewing her food, her expression telegraphing her confusion. Tani felt lost within his father's story. Ten cows? Six? Breeding stock? He felt something very bad in the air, a gust of tension flavoured with the scent of dread.

Abeo turned to him, saying, 'Six cows I paid for a virgin of sixteen years. This has been done for you. Soon I will take you to Nigeria where you will meet her.'

'Why'm I meeting some Nigerian girl?' Tani asked.

'Because you are going to marry her when she is seventeen years.' That said, Abeo went back to eating. He broke off a piece of his swallow and used it to scoop up a small piece of beef. This appeared to remind him of something he wished to add, for he addressed Tani: 'You are lucky in this. A girl her age is usually given to a man of forty years or more because of the cost. Never to a boy like you. But you must settle and take up your manhood soon. So we will go, and while we are there, she will cook for you, and you will get to know her. I have seen to that so you do not end up with someone useless. She is called Omorinsola, by the way.'

Tani folded his hands on the table. The room seemed several degrees hotter than it had been upon their return from Ridley Road. He said, 'I'm not doing tha', Pa.'

Monifa drew in a deep breath. Simi's eyes became as round as old pennies. Abeo looked up from his food and said, 'What is this that you just said to me, Tanimola?'

'I'm not doing it is what I said. I'm not meeting some virgin you've picked out for me, and I'm definitely not marrying anyone when she turns seventeen.' Tani heard his mother murmur his name, so he faced her. 'This isn't the Middle Ages, Mum.'

Monifa said, 'In Nigeria, Tani, these things are arranged so that—'

'We don't live in Nigeria, do we. We live in London and in London people marry who they want to marry *when* they want to marry them. Or at least I do. I will. No one's picking out a wife for me. And I'm not getting married anyway. Not now and definitely not to some guaranteed African breeding virgin. Tha's mad, innit.'

There was a tight little moment of the kind of silence that echoes round a room. Abeo broke it, saying, 'You will do exactly what you are told to do, Tani. You will meet Omorinsola. You are promised to her and she is promised to you, so we will have no more discussion.'

'You,' Tani said, 'are not the ruler of me.'

Monifa gasped. Tani heard this and said, 'No, Mum. I'm not going to Nigeria or to any other place just because he decided it.'

'I head this family,' Abeo told him. 'As a member of it, you will do as I say.'

'I won't,' Tani said. 'If you thought I would do, then you're mistaken. You can't force me to marry anyone.'

'You will do this, Tani. I will see that you do it.'

'Really, eh? Tha's what you think? D'you plan to hold a gun to my head? Tha'll look good in the wedding photos, innit.'

'You watch what comes out of your mouth.'

'Why? What will you do? Beat me up like—'

Monifa quickly said, 'Stop this, Tani. Show your father some respect.' And then, 'Simi, go to—'

'She stays,' Abeo said. And to Tani, 'Finish what it is you wish to say.'

'I've said what I wanted to say.' At that he rose from the table, his chair screeching on the lino. His father did the same.

Abeo's fist clenched. Tani stood his ground. They stared each other down across the table. Abeo finally said, 'Get out of my sight.'

Tani was happy to do so.