

THE PAST HAS CLAWS

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The Past Has Claws

Episode 10

Shaftesbury Avenue was teeming with mostly American and Chinese tourists soaking up the atmosphere and the last of the evening sun. Still shaking, Lulu took a few steps, not really knowing where she was going. She began trying to process all the information she had gleaned from Maya and from her father - all the day's revelations - and was failing. It was too much. Too many emotional triggers. Too much to understand. Too much to work through. What the hell were you thinking - trying to get all those answers on the same day as trying to sort out Tom's problems? She asked herself, her voice lost in the noise of the crowd.

Lulu looked up to see an apparently homeless man approach her. His filthy sweatshirt emblazoned with "YOGANGSTA" all in uppercase and all one word. He wore a few days' stubble and carried a can of beer in one hand. At first, he grinned, showing dirty teeth but as he got closer, his grin became a snarl and he gave Lulu a hefty shoulder barge which would have knocked over a smaller woman and in a strong eastern European accent, spat the words "You need to stop asking the fucking questions, bitch" at her. When Lulu regained her balance, he was gone, melting into the crowd.

Lulu wanted to cry but held it together. She walked aimlessly for a while and eventually headed towards Piccadilly with the idea of jumping on a tube and then taking the train back down to Chichester but thought about the reception she'd have to endure at the sailing club and realised that she was in already in no state to answer the inevitable questions and would certainly not be in a couple of hours. She walked into the middle of the road at Piccadilly Circus and, after a couple of narrow misses, hailed a Black Cab back to her flat in Kensington. She would go back down in the morning she decided. In the cab Lulu found herself exhausted but not sleepy. Her mind was still whirring but not finding answers. Once home she slipped off her clothes, poured herself into a bottle of Shiraz and drifted peacefully into a comatose sleep.

By around five o'clock the following morning, just as the sun was rising, the alcohol had worn off. Lulu woke with a sore head but also a clarity which had eluded her last evening. She had had her phone turned off for yesterday's meeting and only now received the message from Harriet about the second video - she made a mental note to call Tom as soon as was reasonable in the morning.

She had also received a couple of messages from Donald; the first jokey, a bit flirty and telling her he was looking forward to seeing her for lunch. The second, sent quite a few hours later, had an altogether different tone:

“Hello Lulu. So, look, I have finally got around to opening the bureau. It wasn’t really what I had expected and there’s something which involves you. We really need to talk. Please call me as soon as you get this. Don’t worry about the time. Thanks x.”

Lulu hesitated for a while, as it was so early but eventually took him at his word and called him. Donald’s phone didn’t ring, instead the line went straight to his voicemail. She hung up. Curious and slightly worried, she would call him later she thought.

After making herself a black coffee because she had no milk, Lulu cycled through in her mind all she had learned yesterday. Firstly Maya: Lulu concluded that Maya was probably telling the truth and if she wasn’t, she was at least, not the one in charge. Either she had been scared enough to tell whoever it was that Lulu had been asking questions or they had been watching - hence Mr YOGANGSTA, who was the sort of assailant one instructed in person rather than remotely - or she’d done it herself.

Either way she was spooked by Lulu’s presence. So, who could it be? Obviously known to Tom and probably from a long time ago. Lulu remembered back to the Picker’s camp and the Ark four years ago and everything she had been told. It must be someone who knows about Tom’s pending windfall, she surmised - why else go to all that trouble to blackmail someone with little money. Henry? Everyone else was dead, she thought. And who were the others Maya alluded to? Were they connected to Tom?

Lulu poured herself another cup and headed for the shower. And what about her father’s big reveal? She resented how much obvious delight he took in telling her story. She had probably worked out that her mother hadn’t been white and English and that had never really been an issue. As a child she had imagined her as exotic and foreign and from all sorts of different places.

How though had she completely missed that Ronald was gay? In hindsight it was obvious and explained so many, if not all, of his behaviours. As the water, slightly too hot, soaked her hair, she thought for a moment how her life would have been if Ronald hadn't taken them in that day. Where would they have lived? It certainly wouldn't have been anywhere near as comfortable and probably quite difficult but how could she compare that with her childhood sexual abuse and her mother's suicide.

Lulu turned off the shower and started to dry herself deciding that there were too many unknowns, and for the moment at least it didn't bear thinking about. Her father couldn't really be blamed for Bill's abuse, just as Lulu couldn't. The blame there lay only with Bill - and he had been a master of disarming charm and very convincing at playing the charming uncle. Her father must be though, in some way culpable for her mother's deep unhappiness, mustn't he? She allowed herself to dwell on how young and how lonely her mother must have been and, finding her "husband" in bed with another man must have been so terrible for her.

Whilst she dressed, Lulu thought more about Donald's message and picked up her phone to check exactly what he had said. It was only then she saw there was a video attachment to his message...

“Tom? Morning Tom... Well, you have answered, and you don’t sound completely inebriated or even hungover so that’s a good start. Yes, I know its bloody early. Sorry but I got another video and I know that means you did, and...”

After she had watched the video attached to Donald’s message, Lulu decided she needed to get down to Northshore urgently and, after gathering up a few essentials which she had inevitably forgotten last week, had left the flat immediately she finished dressing. Something prompted her to drive down rather than take the train, so she needed to leave now to miss the worst of the traffic. She crossed Battersea bridge in her bottle green Mini Countryman and tried Donald again, but his phone was still switched off - or out of charge. She had been quite surprised when Tom answered her second call:

“...Watching me like a bloody hawk all day and night...said she’s going to leave me...serious this time Lu...” Tom had obviously got up and walked away from the bedroom, so he didn’t wake Pippa. Lulu remembered that the signal was never good downstairs in the cottage. “I’m sober Lu but I’m frightened...Did you watch the video? I’m sorry Lu. I know what it looks like, but I promise, I wasn’t aware of what was happening. I was drugged. I feel sick just thinking about it.”

Lulu wondered what could be in the second video to make Tom feel quite so bad but didn’t answer his question. “Well, stay sober, and try not to worry. I’ve found out quite a lot and think I’m on to something. I’ll be down in a couple of hours, and we can talk then.”

Lulu worried now whether she had overstated her case. What did she really know? How much of it was relevant? She called Harriet to tell her she was on her way down and had received her message. No answer so she left a voicemail. She reminded herself it was still “bloody early” and smiled.

Emily was in seventh heaven. To say her mood and whole demeanour had changed since Friday evening would be an enormous understatement. George was still a conceited, over privileged idiot but he was really interested in her and spending time with her and in fact was just around all the time he wasn't working and when he was working for Harriet, she could see him and watched him from the club as he entertained the children and mummies alike. She didn't know that Harriet had effectively warned him off having sex with her and was now lying in her bed in Harriet's flat having the shortest of lie-ins, basking in the fact that at the end of yesterday evening, when she had practically offered herself to him on a plate he had said "There's plenty of time for all that. We'll see each other tomorrow" before giving her the softest, gentlest kiss on her mouth and turning to walk home.

Despite Lulu's fears about the traffic, it was light apart from a bit of congestion as expected at the A3/M25 junction and then again as she approached the Chichester bypass. She made good time, arriving just as the early sailors were arriving at the club. After parking in the public car park, paying the ever-rising fees, and in so doing reminding herself why she always caught the train, Lulu headed straight to see Harriet who was already on the dinghy staging, busy coaching and placating her first-time Mirror sailors, some of whom were worrying about the wind - which had increased substantially and unexpectedly over the gentle gusts of the previous day.

Interrupted by nervous ten year olds asking Harriet if it was safe to race and a very occasional parent reaffirming to their child it was all fine and using Harriet as a mute sounding board, Lulu shared all she had learned in London from Maya, the altercation with the YOGANSTA man and, attempting to shield her screen from the sun so it was visible, showing her the video sent to her by Donald late on the previous evening.

"Can you see? Can you hear what he is saying?" Harriet peered at the phone, cupping her hand against the glare, trying to hear Donald's voice whilst Lulu gave a running commentary. "Rather than the dusty disorganised pile of papers left by his father over four years ago before he died, there is a bunch of thirteen neat A4 folders, each entitled 'Debtor' with the person's name, the date of the contract, the amount borrowed and now owing after some payment and with interest, and a copy of the signed contract. Although the contracts are all with the sailing club - the money was all borrowed from James Napier. Can you see the names? That one is signed by Tom...your father and it also has your name on it for some reason. There are some names I recognise but of people I don't know but you might. There is Frank's and there at the back is my husband's, Jeremy - both with DECEASED written across the file diagonally in large red letters.... And there my darling Harriet, is the huge bag of cash he found along with the files."

Harriet thought for a while. Another fearful child with big eyes appeared at her side and timorously asked whether they were going to be racing. She looked up at the suddenly blackening sky, thought about sending Billy down to the widest part of the harbour on Sea Lion to check on the wind but looking over to him working on boat a few metres away she caught the look on his face and the almost imperceptible shake of his head. It wasn't her call but there was no-one on the racing committee who would go against Billy's advice. "I'll ask the Race Master to wait half an hour to see if the wind drops and we'll take it from there. Don't disappear or derig your boat." Again, Billy gave a very slight shake of his head and raised his eyebrows.

"Well, that explains why I got an email, and you didn't." she pronounced at last to Lulu. So, I reckon it's going to be the same people being given money by this unknown benefactor as are in those files. Club members who owe or owed James Napier money. if it isn't that Maya woman behind it who would know that information and be able to arrange the honey traps?"

"Well, it's got to involve someone in that house" Lulu nodded in the direction of Napiers. "What I really want to understand right now though is what has happened to Donald and why is he not returning my calls or messages?"

"Yes, that *is* strange" agreed Harriet. "Sorry, I've just got to pop over to the bandstand to tell them we should postpone the first races." The race control centre, known by all as the bandstand due to its similarity in shape was only a hundred meters away and Lulu watched as Harriet hurried over.

Billy was fitting storm covers to one of the Mirror dinghies whose crew hadn't arrived. He looked up at Lulu. "The big fella came back to The Shore around eight o'clock and stayed 'till closing. He had the last of the pie at the bar and a couple of pints and left with a wave. Didn't say much to anyone, just fiddled on his phone and cursed a bit."

"Thanks Billy, you're a marvel. Where's your sling? Is your arm better so soon?"

Billy shrugged. His arm wasn't fully healed, and he certainly didn't have his strength back, but he had grown tired of the restrictions of the sling and with the assistance of a handful of painkillers, had decided to deal with the pain. He began to formulate a reply to Lulu but just then the darkened sky was split in two by a flash of lightening and seconds later an almighty crack of thunder reverberated around the harbour. The ensuing deluge sent children and parents alike scurrying for shelter like so many mice, Lulu included. Billy stood in the rain and smiled. "racing postponed, as requested Harriet" he laughed and hurried to finish tying down the storm cover. Another flash leapt closer this time, somewhere near the harbour mouth. "racing cancelled for the day more like."

A lifetime of not being included, of always being on the edge of the group, had made Billy extremely adept at watching and listening to other people's conversations. He had learned to lip read, to interpret the most subtle of gestures and to make the intellectual jumps to fill in the gaps, especially from those he knew well. Of course, Lulu had made it easy for him this time by pointing out the salient points of Donald's video to Harriet within his earshot and he had picked up more than a nuance of the need to find Donald. The storm and the cancellation of the day's sailing provided him with the perfect opportunity. He knew what he had to do.

It was early on the Tuesday afternoon. The rain had stopped temporarily but Billy was still wet from earlier. Looking through his hole in the fence, he could see across the lawn to the front of the Napiers and a little of the drive nearest the house. He watched and waited and waited some more. He couldn't see any cars on the drive but that didn't mean no-one was home. From his previous visit, he guessed that Donald's room was the first-floor room which had had the light on. That would be the obvious place to look for clues. Although it would have been the easiest route, he certainly couldn't risk crossing the lawn, he had to find a way to get to the side of the house where it was shielded from view by the trees.

It was slow progress pushing through the dense thicket of young trees which now formed the boundary between the neighbouring gardens. They were too close for Billy to squeeze through, so he had to painstakingly bend each one back to create a gap large enough. After an hour of or more of hard work Billy reached the house. His arm throbbed. Sticking close to the wall, Billy carefully investigated the first window he came to on the ground floor from which shone a low-level greenish light. A figure lay motionless in a hospitable bed in front of him. There was a drip and other monitors in Mrs Napier's arm, some screens on the wall behind her. An array of various medicine bottles and rolls of sticking plaster with new wound dressings and various scissors and scalpels were neatly arranged on a four wheeled trolley to one side. A hoist complete with swivel was tucked away next to her wheelchair.

Billy deduced that Donald's room was directly above this one, but how to get there without the possibility of waking the woman or being seen by someone else? Crawling on his hands and knees under the window, he came next to the large drawing room. A pair of wooden French doors each with a side window opened onto a semi-circular patio which on any other summer's day would have been a perfect spot to catch the evening sun. Billy tried the door which was predictably locked. However, Billy noticed that one of the side windows wasn't quite flush to its frame, probably where the wood had swollen when wet. This meant the handle on the inside was slightly raised and its blade was not engaged. Billy knew he could get it open and wished he'd brought his tools. He could see the door at the far end of the room though and decided that there was still too much risk of being seen and caught if he entered that way.

He looked up. A small fanlight window was open in Donald's room. If he had brought a ladder that would be an obvious entry point. He thought of going back to his boathouse to fetch one but that would have taken too long. He eyed the Victorian cast iron drainpipe and reluctantly concluded that was his only option. With two good arms he probably wouldn't have hesitated too long; the pipe was substantial and in a reasonably good state of repair. All the fixings seemed sound enough from down on the ground. However, with only the one good arm it was another matter. Billy threw a few more painkillers into his mouth and surveyed the challenge. He removed his shirt and wiped the water from the surface of the pipe as high as he could reach. He looked for obvious handholds and perches and picked out his route.

Once he started, the climb didn't prove to be too difficult. He heavily favoured his good arm, trying, and partially succeeding to not put on any weight on the other, wincing loudly when he did so. After a few minutes he was level with the tiled windowsill and forgetting to hide himself, hooked his fingers into the fanlight and shuffled to sit on the tiles, his feet resting on the drainpipe to support him.

Billy hadn't known what to expect. His best guess was that Donald had taken the large sum of cash and headed back to Australia - never to return. Or maybe that was just Billy's wishful thinking. He had nothing against Donald per se but didn't trust anyone much; especially strangers and especially when they got close to Lulu. He needn't have worried about keeping out of sight. There was nobody looking back at him. He shifted his weight so he could look further into the room to make sure he was right in what he thought he could see. His heart was racing now as he surveyed the scene which confronted him. He struggled to believe it. Just then the concrete windowsill tile on which he was sitting gave way and he fell, crashing, hurtling all the way to the ground, right outside Mrs Napier's window...
