



Forbidden  
Peaches

By Senna Fisher

*Forbidden Peaches*

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## Chapter 1

Adrian Arkley had been bored the whole morning. He watched Mike, his colleague and friend and saw that he was equally bored. *The problem with politics, he thought, is that you have to sit through many tedious meetings to get what you want.* So, today, as usual, they were scheduled for a number of talks and debates. He felt a little tense because he knew the opposition party was going to fight him in his project to support his new development. He loved it out there in the wilderness and he badly wanted the project to be a success. However, his political nemesis, the People's Democratic Party, was going to fight him. He wanted to refurbish and restructure some of the accommodation in the Kenton Nature Park, a wilderness area in his favorite place in the world: Thornville Game Reserve. The PDP was resisting his plans and they had a powerful lobby in their favor. They had a purist view on the environment and wanted to leave the area untouched. He also wanted that, but it had been losing ground lately with few tourists visiting. The Park had to sustain itself and it could not do so with all the purists refusing to refurbish the accommodation and provide a restaurant facility. Today they would be debating precisely this issue and he was ready for a fight. The PDP was bringing in one of its consultants to join them and he was in no mood to argue with a political strategist. Apparently he was brilliant, young and dynamic. That is not what he needed today.

He was looking out the window when he heard the silence that descended into the room. The chairman, Charles Hornby, the Minister of Agriculture, stopped talking suddenly. He smiled broadly. Adrian looked up and realized that a woman had walked into the room. He watched her as she assessed the room and everybody in it, her eyes slightly wide. He looked at the dark blue suit she wore, how short the skirt was and how long it made her legs look. She was wearing a crisp white shirt and clearly wanted to create the impression of a 'no nonsense' person. She held a computer in one hand and a handbag slung over her shoulder. She looked at him suddenly and quickly looked away. She had a dismissive air about her, which made want to go to her, to have her. She had quiet sexuality which seemed to dance around her like an aura. He looked at her, still surveying all of them and realized that she had deliberately done that to establish her power, her dominance. It aroused him to think how he wanted to return the favor and dominate her and assert his power. He watched as she carefully placed all her bags on the table and sat down primly. As she crossed her legs, he noticed how her skirt crept up her legs. He had a good view of

them, because she was a few seats away from him. *The bitch knows how to play the game. She is clearly making sure that she has both sexual and social power. I am definitely going to have her.* He looked around the room and realized that every man there was having the same thoughts. *Okay, so she knows what she is doing. Who is she anyway? Walking into a political meeting and making herself comfortable like she belongs here?*

“Frances, I am so pleased you could make it. I understood that there was some confusion over the dates. Well, I am very pleased to see you.”

*I am sure he is,* thought Adrian. *Aren't we all?*

“Everybody, this is Frances Pierce. She is the consultant from my Party. As you know, she was invited to assist us bring the matter of the wildness camp to a close. Well, Frances, you are right on time. If you don't mind, we need to wrap up some other issues and then you can go ahead. Is that suitable?”

She nodded slightly at him.

“Does anybody object if Frances remains in the room for the other items?”

Nobody responded. There is not a single man here who is going to object to her presence. Adrian smiled to himself. He was tempted to object, but he had not been paying attention and had no idea what they had been talking about. And anyway, Charles was watching him, giving that look that he was to conduct himself with decorum. *Okay, so she is special to Charles. Perhaps I should just leave it alone.* But he had a strong urge to object so she could lose some of that confident power that she held everyone in the room with. Even the few women present seemed to stare at her in admiration. Adrian appraised her. *Yes, she is sexy. She is not beautiful in a conventional way, but she has that air of power and sex that clings around her. She seems fully aware of it and very quietly, she enters into the subconscious of every man and says, “you want me. Will you dare to have me?” It is in everything she does. The way she sits upright, her legs showing, the way her hair falls over her eyes, but just enough for a man to look into them. Most importantly, her sex appeal comes from the way she establishes her dominance of everyone in the room. It is driving right into the lower parts of my body.* He tried to listen to the rest of the discussion, but he was thinking how he would get her. *Shall I be sweet and charming or wild and assertive with her? What will make her respond quickly?*

He looked up her and realized that she was watching him, her head tilted slightly. Her face had a quizzical expression, as if she was trying to read his thoughts. He smiled at her and

she simply nodded at him. His heart was pounding as her eyes locked with his. *Okay, she is tough. Charm is not her style. Okay, so wild and assertive it is going to be.*

Frances had come to the meeting feeling a little apprehensive. She had been told that the issues were complex and emotional and that the National Liberal Party was not going to budge on any issues. They wanted a fight for the wrong reasons. Also, she had been told that the wilderness project was being driven by Adrian Arkley, a strong, passionate opponent who always got his way. She had thoroughly researched the topic and thought that they could compromise. Her Party had to play along with him on this one, or they could lose a great deal of support. He did not know that they wanted to agree with him, but could not have simply admitted to it. After all, an election was coming up soon and the Party could not be seen to be submitting to their enemies. Her job had been to come into the meeting, hear what he had to say and then offer a 'compromise'. In essence, there was nothing different to what he wanted. She had vast experience in negotiation matters and had felt pretty sure that the meeting was to be easy and short.

But sitting here now, in the Board Room, she was not sure. For one, she had not expected Adrian to be quite so handsome. She had seen photographs of him, but they all seemed bland. He had an air of disinterest about him, as if he didn't care what happened. *That is a bad sign. This means he will fight on principle, not for political games.* Also, he seemed totally unaffected by her as a woman. He had simply looked at her and looked out the window. *Not good at all, since he is the key resistance to any of my suggestions.* She looked at him. He seemed not be listening to the meeting. His mind has wondered off somewhere and she could see the way he looked out the window and then back into the room that his mind was trying to decide something. *What is he thinking?* He looked up suddenly and smiled at her. *Fuck, he is simply gorgeous, the lazy, easy way he smiled at me, looking straight into my eyes. He is not afraid of me in the way most men are.* Her heart was beating fast. *Damned, he has got to me. He knows how to charm me and he is onto my game. Fuck.* He looked so sure of himself that she decided she would seduce him. *Damn him, I will have him and I will dominate him so much he will beg me to release him from my power.*

~~~~~

Adrian arrived just before seven at Frances's apartment. He was standing at the door, looking around. While he scrutinized everything, Frances did the same to him. He looked so handsome now, his hair slightly wet, curling up at the back of his neck. He was wearing snug jeans and a loose t-shirt. *Oh, he is too sexy to be in my apartment.* She felt her restless lust starting up again. Her body was definitely enjoying the view.

"Oh please, come in. Can I get you anything?"

He looked at her suddenly, his eyes dark. "What do you have to offer, Ms. Pierce?"

When she blushed, he smiled. "Well, let me see. Perhaps a cup of tea is not what a big man like you needs. Something stronger and more decadent? Perhaps a scotch? Or some wine?" She smiled back at him.

"Scotch with water, no ice. That will do for now, thanks."

"Okay, coming up" and she dashed into the kitchen. She let out a long sigh. *This is not good.* Her body was clearly planning a mutiny of her brain. It wanted him and was not prepared to listen to her brain that was trying it remain rational and professional. She prepared his drink and her hands were shaking slightly. She poured herself a glass of wine, hoping it would calm her treacherous body. *Such lust! Behave!* She went back into the lounge to find him sitting down.

Adrian sank his body into the closest chair to ease his growing anxiety. He had not been prepared for the strong feelings he would experience when he saw her. He knew he wanted her, but he had planned his strategy well. He would flirt with her, tease her and then when she was thoroughly embarrassed and afraid, he would pounce on her. But his strategy had already failed. She had given him back his own flirtation, with a sweet, innocent smile which made him want to throw her on couch and teach her a thing or two. Also, she looked so devastatingly sexy now, he knew that he was not the dominant one and he had no doubt that she had planned her seduction of him carefully. Her long dress swept gently against her ankles when she walked and her breasts just peeked shyly at him under the blue dress. Its buttons were calling to him to open them slowly, slowly, until it fell off. Her hair was pinned up loosely, just so he could let it lose. It begged him to release it from its bondage. Her laughing eyes were singing to him, calling him to take them to a higher, passionate place. Everything about her was calling to him, telling him what he needed to do. *Damn!* He needed better control here. *No woman is going to make*

*me into a drooling schoolboy.* But, he knew it was too late when she walked back into the lounge, smiling at him in a chirpy, girlish way.

“There you are,” as she handed him the drink. Their hands touched lightly and Adrian could have sworn she was shaking, just a bit. But he dismissed the thought when she sat down across from him, cool and in control.

“So, what are we having tonight?”

“What?” he stared at her in confusion.

“For dinner. I thought you said we would have something to eat before we work. Was I mistaken?”

“No, sorry I just didn’t hear that. No, you are not mistaken. Yes, we must get some food. Tell me, Ms. Pierce, what do you desire?” He smiled slightly at her.

She did not answer him. *He is such a flirt! This is not helping my body at all.*

“I would like something hot and spicy, I guess, but I’m easy.” She smiled sweetly at him.

Adrian just stared at her. *She is a bit of a wild thing, isn’t she?*

“Well, what do you want, Adrian?”

“Oh, there is a Mexican place close by.”

“Oh yes, Pedro’s. I eat there often. He also delivers for me when I am lazy or too busy working. That would be great.”

“Okay, so it’s settled.”

They left shortly and Frances was relieved that Pedro’s was quiet. It was usually so busy that people almost sat on each other. She did not want to have to be too close to Adrian tonight, because she would not be responsible for anything her body did then.

“Frances, well, I see you have grace us with your presence.” He was laughing.

“Pedro! Hello. Good to see you. Things going well?”

“Oh yes and I see things are going well for you too, yes?” He was surveying Adrian.

“Ur, yes, thank you.”

“I have seen you before, have we met?”

Adrian said curtly, “yes, I have been here before. Nice place.”

“Thank you. Now, Frances, what are you having tonight?”

“I don’t know yet. Anything special?”

“Yes, I find you a seat in the corner first. No disturbances, yes?”

“Fine.”

They followed him to a table deep inside the restaurant away from the few guests crowding the bar.

“Frances, I think you need to try my new tortilla tonight. It is called ‘lovers delight’. Not too hot, but full of many spices and surprises. It is, what is the word.... sensual, yes?”

“Oh yes, I am happy. Adrian?”

“Yes, I’ll have that too, thanks.”

Adrian chatted about people on the Project, trying to distract his mind from the delightful woman who looked so tough, but blushed at every sexual innuendo. He needed to think about work and not her body so close to him and her face leaning forward to listen to his every word.

Pedro brought them drinks and told her some joke Adrian did not understand. She was laughing heartily with Pedro.

“I see you are well received here.”

“Yes, I told you. Pedro feeds me on many a night. Are you alright?”

“Yes, of course. Now, back to work.”

He continued talking and Frances felt warm and cozy with him. She liked the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled and the easy passion with which he described his work.

“This project could be the most wonderful contribution to our history. It is almost...what is the word, ‘sensual’ yes?”

Frances laughed.

“You are a wicked man. Leave Pedro alone.”

Adrian smiled. *She is definitely going to find out how wicked I am.*

“Frances, I thought you were a man.”

“Nobody had ever confused me with a man before. What kind of women do you know?”

He was laughing. “You know what I mean. Your name is masculine. I would never mistake you for a man, that’s for sure.”

“Good, I am relieved. You got me worried there for a moment.”

“Some of the guys have met you before and none of them mentioned that you were a woman, so I assumed you were a man.”

“Perhaps they didn’t think about it. It is not relevant, I suppose.”

Adrian felt his body smile. He thought of how relevant it would be when she moaned in his arms and begged him for more.

They left the restaurant a few hours later, having talked about many things. Frances was anxious for the evening not to end.

“Would you like some coffee?”

She asked as she was getting out of his car.

He hesitated, caught between his hunger to be with her and his commonsense which was telling him to get the hell out before it was too late. The sexual tension between them had been building up so high tonight, that he should go home and do some work to distract his body. But, he said suddenly, “yes, of course” and followed her.

Frances battled to open the door. The fight between her body and her brain was getting so vicious now that she could do nothing. She turned to say something apologetic to him, but he was standing so close to her that she could feel him breathing. She looked up at him and his dark eyes looked confused and lost. Then he kissed her lightly. He pushed her backwards slightly and lifted her face and kissed her again. This time her lips fought back. *I want him*, they screamed. *Go away. We want those quivering lips to melt into us again.* And she kissed him. He pushed her against the door and their lips abandoned their rational masters for pure erotic pleasure. When he finally pulled away from her, his voice was quiet.

“Frances, do you want me to come inside?” His was gruff and carried a threatening undertone.

“Yes, no, I don’t know.”

“Don’t know?”

“Well, this is a bit..... irregular.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “Irregular? That is very funny. Now, what will it be?”

“Adrian, I can’t think. You have me locked against the door, I can’t think.”

“Don’t think, Frances. Not now. Does this help?”

He cupped her breast in his hand and caressed her gently. Her breast, tired of waiting for the debate to be over, leapt into his hand. She arched her back to him and her arms, bent on mutiny, found their way around his neck to entangle and confuse her brain.

“Yes.”

He kissed her again and then he spoke in a coaxing voice. “So, do you think you can open the door?”

“Oh ....ur.., yes.”

She turned from him to open the door and he stood close to her, not touching her, but his breathing was hard and fast against her back. Inside, he pulled her to him and held her for a while. *Shit*, he thought, *where is my dominance plan now?*

And, as instructed by her dress so many hours ago, he slowly undid the buttons until it fell to the floor. He stepped away from her so that he could look at her. “You are the most incredible woman I have ever seen. Frances, Frances...”

When they kissed this time, their lips had mastered the art of setting up their barriers against debate and conversation. She pulled off his t-shirt roughly and laid her head on his shoulder. But Adrian was not to be distracted. He pulled her onto the couch and lay her down. Leaning over her, he smiled slowly.

“Now, Frances. I ask again, what do you desire?” She simply looked at him, her eyes wide with passion.

He ran his hand down the length of her body and she moaned.

“This, perhaps?”

“Yes, yes, Adrian yes!”

They must have fallen off to sleep on the couch, because Frances awoke to find his large body over her. She tried to move, but he was too heavy. She wriggled under him, trying not to wake him.

“Frances, don’t you know when enough is enough?”

“Adrian, don’t make fun of me. Can you move up a bit?”

“Hmm,” he moved slightly off her, but kept his legs on her body.

“Ur. Adrian?”

“Yes?”

“Nothing.”

He was fully wake now and sat up. He was watching her, trying to pretend she was not nervous.

“Don’t you think this is inappropriate?”

“A little late for that discussion doesn’t you think? Yes and also irregular.”

He was laughing at her now, because he liked to see her a little anxious. He smiled to himself. He knew he would get under that confidence she had wearing in the meeting.

“Frances, I am teasing you. Yes, it is everything you say it is.”

“I just don’t know what to say.”

“At this point, it is customary for the woman to exalt my virtues as a man. You are to tell me how great I am. Clearly, you have missed your cue. Next time...

“Next time?”

“Yes, Frances, we both know there will be a next time. In fact, it will be in about twenty minutes. So.....”

He was stroking her thighs now. “While I am busy here, I suggest you prepare your speech.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Adrian sat through a rather uninspired debate in Parliament. But he was pleased, because it gave him time to think about Frances. He was feeling excited at the great sex they had had,

but also a little perplexed by his responses to her. He had expected the great sex, but he had not anticipated the way their lovemaking would affect him. He had felt more than her body last night. He had felt a part of her, as if she had let him into her inner core. He had known her, so deeply and clearly and it had completely distressed his brain. He could not explain to himself why being with her was so special. He just felt it. He had to see her again, to enjoy her laughter, her games and to know her inner core again. He liked that so much because he knew that he let her into some secret part of himself. He had felt her presence deep down his personal cave and he liked to see her there. It comforted him and made him feel so exposed.

He felt himself trust her inside of him and the irony of that made him want to laugh. She was his political enemy, but he was prepared to let her inside of him. He knew she felt the same way, because she had cried quietly when she thought he was asleep. He had just held her, pretending not to know. *What do you say to a woman who has got passed all your defenses and gone straight into you? What is there to say?*

He had watched her making coffee, trying to reason with her brain and losing hopelessly. He had simply kissed her. If only she knew how he had the same problem. What the hell was he doing making love to the woman who could destroy his most precious project?

They had not spoken much and he was disturbed by the fact that they did not need words. It had been a different experience for both of them.

He was exhilarated to see a message on his cell phone. *You were wonderful. Sorry speech is a little late.* He smiled and replied. *Tonight you can try and get it right. Your place or mine?*

*Mine.*

He smirked in satisfaction at her crisp, confident response.

~ ~ ~ ~

Frances was lying next to him in her bed. He had his arm around her and she wished they could stay like this forever. “Adrian, are you awake?”

“Of course, what do you desire?”

She laughed. “I desire to talk.”

“Oh no, really?”

“Yes, really. I can’t go with you to Kenton Park this weekend. I have made other plans and...”

He moved his arm away from her and turned away.

“Adrian?”

“Yes. I am listening about your other plans. Tell him you are busy.”

“It’s my parents. I told them I would see them this weekend.”

“Where do they live?”

“Down at South Beach.”

“Okay, that is about 50 minutes down the coast?”

“Yes.”

“I will take you there and you can bond with them. Then we go.”

“Well, I sort of try to spend the weekend with them.”

“Frances, we are going up there this weekend. Today is Thursday. That means, tomorrow.”

“But Adrian, it will be too hard for us, together, not being together.”

“Yes, but you are coming. Do we understand each other?”

“No, I don’t understand why you think this is all normal and that it is okay.”

“I think it is normal to want to be with you. I think it is not okay that we are from the opposite sides of the political table. It is not okay, but I also know that being with you is okay. What do you want to do, Frances?”

She was silent now.

“I want you to calm down and tell me how this is going to work. How are we going to sneak around like horny teenagers and hope we are not going to get caught?”

“Yes, you are a bit of a horny teenager, aren’t you?” He smiled at her and then said seriously, “Frances, we have no choice at this time. I know it feels awful, but we have no business wanting to be in bed this like this. So we have to pay the price for the pleasure.”

“That sounds so cold.”

He turned to her.

“I am not trying to be cold. I am trying to convince myself that I have gone crazy and that I am dreaming. I am trying to explain to myself, every day, why I dash back from work to climb eagerly and wildly into your bed, okay? So far, that is all I have come up with. Do you have a warmer explanation to yourself?”

“No, but I felt so guilty today. Charles was chatting about you and the project. He was so enthusiastic that you and I did not clash and cause problems. I thought how horrible it was that I was deceiving him. You know?”

“Yes, I know, it feels like shit. Anyway, you should tell Charles that we do clash, all the time!”

She hit him hard on his arm and he laughed. “Frances, I want you to come with me this weekend. Partly because I feel so guilty and want it to all go right. We can’t afford to mess it up, because then we will never forgive ourselves. Do you want me to take you to your parents before we go?”

“No. It is in the opposite direction. I suppose I will tell them I have to work. My father will grunt and my mother will fret. But I know that you are right. I know.”

“Then it’s settled. I will pick you up at five.”

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## Chapter 2

When Adrian arrived early to pick her up, he was edgy and irritable. He glared at her as she tried to put her things together, dropping one of her files and trying to put it together again. He tapped his foot on the floor and had only kissed her lightly when he arrived. He looked like he was going to burst when she asked him to wait because she forgot her computer inside her apartment. They drove in silence, until Frances could take it no more. She sighed in defeat.

“Adrian, are you angry with me?”

“No, why?”

“You seem a little edgy and snappy with me.”

He was quiet for a while. He sighed deeply. "I'm sorry about that. I suppose I am a little irritated that Kevin has decided to join us. He doesn't usually come on these field trips. He is a nosy guy and will definitely create problems if he sees us together. The other guys you know from your previous dealings. They are purist greenies like you and they don't really care about people's private issues. I am angry that he is coming along."

"Oh, okay. But, you know, it is probably for the best. This way we will be forced to stay away from each other."

"Yes, I suppose you are right." His voice made it clear that he was not convinced or comforted by her words.

His foul mood dissipated as they drove along and by the time they reached the game reserve, they were on friendly terms again. Frances had a great time as they drove through the reserve. She was captivated by a pride of lions that sat proudly near the roadside and watched them in disdain. She sat in awe when Adrian showed her a pair of teenage elephant bulls frolicking in the bushes. She was so happy now and relaxed that he stopped the car and kissed her as she was admiring a herd of buffalo taking an early evening stroll.

"What was that for?"

"For being such a marvelous companion, even when I am bad-tempered."

"Oh."

Adrian was smiling to himself. She was a remarkable woman, the way she passionately enjoyed everything in her life as if it was the first time. He liked the way she treated each experience as a fresh, new beginning in her life. Even in bed, she would moan and groan as if she had never been touched by a man before. It made him want to own her and brand her for himself.

When they got to the Wilderness Area it was already dark. Everyone else had arrived and Kevin greeted her enthusiastically. She was surprised, but smiled kindly back at him. The rest of Adrian's team was friendly but guarded towards her. She had worked with some of them before, but on this project, she was the opposition and they were clearly planning to treat with caution. But she smiled about their wary attitude towards her. They clearly did not appreciate that she wanted the project as much as they did. Now, having Adrian in her life, she wanted it also for him, to see his pleasure when it was completed.

They ate a good meal prepared by the local staff and they sat by a fire outside and talked. Frances was observing Adrian in his natural habitat and she enjoyed the collegiate way he interacted with his staff. She liked the way they teased him and he pretended to ignore them. She watched his eyes crinkle with laughter and desperately wanted to curl up next to him at the fire. The full, lush moon and bright night sky invoked warm, romantic stirrings in her. She wished she could walk over to him and hold him in the moonlight. She felt the sharp pain of longing and tried to see his facial expression. He was lost in thought, pretending to be listening to their conversation. *He is drinking too much*, she thought.

Adrian was thinking about her. How beautiful she looked against the moon. It shone over her head in a soft halo of reflective light. He liked this woman, with her sharp tongue and quirky comments. She accepted in good cheer snide comments about her political alliances and she simply ignored Kevin when he tried to goad her into a fight. *Yes, I actually like her as a person*. This was a surprise to him, because he had long convinced himself that it was the sex he liked so much. He watched her as she shivered against a light breeze and wanted to go to her and make her feel warm. He picked up his scotch and gulped it, hoping it would dull his urge to hold her right this minute. But it didn't. He got up and got another one. *Maybe, this one will give me the fix I need*.

Frances also got up and excused herself. Adrian helped her to her tent and waited while she settled in.

“Are you alright, got everything you need?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Okay, good night then.”

“Goodnight.”

He turned to walk out.

“Adrian, will you come by later?” He grunted and left the tent.

Frances was a little disappointed. But she told herself it was for the best. She was fast asleep when she realized that Adrian was saying something to her.

“Hmmm?”

“Frances, will you move up? Where do you expect me to sleep?”

She moved a bit and he snuggled in near her. She curled herself into him and they fell asleep.

~ ~ ~ ~

When she woke up in the morning, the air was crisp and sunlight was steaming into her tent. She had forgotten to close the side flaps and it was clearly going to be a bright day. She turned to Adrian, but he was not there.

She went and had a shower and when she returned, Adrian was waiting for her.

“I have been instructed to come and collect you for breakfast. I think they are all scared of you, Frances. Nobody wanted to be the one who might find you naked or indecent.”

“And you are the brave one?”

“Yes, I told them that I hoped you would be naked or indecent!” He laughed.

“Are you going to get impatient with me, tap your foot and such like things while I get my stuff together?”

“Yes, of course. You should know me better by now.”

“Well, if that’s the case. I will meet you at breakfast.”

He laughed. “My dear, we are in my territory now. I don’t think you must be too brazen with me.”

“Okay, okay. I need to get those new maps that Gwen gave me last night and the data, and...”

He went to her and held her and kissed her. She pulled him closer and kissed him back. He groaned and pushed her away slightly.

“Not now, Frances. I can’t guarantee we’ll make it out of this tent.”

She sighed and moved away from him. “Okay, let’s get the stuff we need.”

Adrian picked up the papers and maps and led her out of the tent. He ran his fingers through his hair impatiently.

“Let’s get out of here before it is too late, okay?”

Frances smiled. *He is really horny this morning. It serves him right for falling asleep in a drunken stupor.* She followed him to breakfast and went to sit with Gwen and Kevin.

Gwen was a lovely woman with a great sense of humor and a quick mind. She worked with Adrian on all his projects and she was the Chief Conservator for his Ministry. She was telling Kevin that Adrian was in a bad mood today, because he had too much to drink last night.

“He was not even amused when we asked him what terrible sorrows he was trying to escape. He just sat there and drank more. I can hardly believe he is even awake now. I thought he would sleep it off today.”

“Yes, I noticed that he drank too much last night. It must have to spend four hours in a car with the PDP!”

“Ha. Ha. Ha. You can blame us for anything, but not Adrian’s drinking habits. Even we can’t do anything about that!”

They were laughing when Adrian came to join them.

“So, are we ready yet?”

“Yes, yes, yes, always ready.”

She got up and Adrian looked at her. *I hope he is not going to take that foul mood out on me*, she thought. They walked to the other campsite with Adrian walking alongside her in a dark and gloomy bubble.

“Adrian, are you okay?”

“Yes, a little. I had too much to drink last night.”

“Ouch!”

“Do you want to know why?”

“Ur... I suspect not.”

“Hmm, because a certain temptress, after giving me a long lecturer about keeping my distance, seduced me into her bed. I spent hours in drunken heaven trying to figure it out. What does she want? But in the end, I could not find the answer.”

“Oh, you poor thing. So what happened?”

“I found my way to her, in my drunken stupor and fell asleep. It was glorious.”

“Oh I see. The poor temptress.”

He laughed. "Perhaps I will have to make amends tonight. What do you think about all this?"

"I think the temptress was very pleased that you went to her in your drunken stupor. But I am quite sure she won't mind if you make amends anyway."

He smiled and nodded. "That is good advice. Perhaps you can advise the temptress to close the buttons of her blouse so my mood can improve a bit?"

"Oops, sorry. Not a good start is it?" She sniggered.

"Hmmm, we shall see, in the depths of the night, whether the brazen temptress will dare to tease me this way."

"What are you two whispering about?" Gwen walked next to Adrian.

"Oh nothing, life and its little problems. I was just seeking advice from Frances about something."

"Are you okay, Adrian? You look like you need some sleep."

"I am fine. Believe it or not, I did get some good sleep last night and even woke up before all of you. Ah, here we are."

Once he started talking about work, he lost some of his bad temper and began to work in earnest. He was tireless and they only stopped when one of his conservators protested that he was starving. Adrian enjoyed working with Frances. She listened carefully and asked many questions which were cleverly disguised to provide solutions. She allowed Adrian's team to believe they had all the answers, by simply asking them the right questions. He liked her style. She wanted them to take ownership of the project and allowed them the space to do that. He wondered if she did that to him as well, making him think he is taking ownership of her, when all she was doing was leading him there. But he looked her, talking so seriously to Greg, The Greenie and he dismissed the thought.

By late afternoon, they had completed most of the work they had planned and everyone went off to take a break. Adrian went to Frances and asked her if she wanted to go for a drive.

"No, I think you should get some sleep." She said sweetly.

"Yes, I suppose so. Tonight is no good is it?"

He went off and Frances went for a short walk around the camp. She observed everything she could about it and when she returned, Adrian was sitting in the pub, trying to read a newspaper.

“No sleep?”

“No, I tried, but I seem to need my temptress for that. So I came out here for company, but everybody has gone away. Where have you been?”

“I took a short walk about. I think Kevin took the others up to the other camp in the reserve. There was an offer of lots of drinks and I thought it wise to decline.”

“Why?”

“Because I thought they needed a chance to gossip about me and not have to be nice to me. Anyway, after your story about drunken heaven, I thought it best not to.”

“Frances, you mustn’t make fun of me when I am in a mad mood. It is not in your best interests.” His eyes narrowed and he stared at her.

“Relax, it was just a joke. I didn’t want to go drinking. I just wanted to chill out. Okay?”

“Okay. Would you like some coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

He went off into the kitchen and Frances followed him. “And why are you in a bad mood?”

“Because I am a foolish man and I don’t know what I am doing. I have no clue about anything.”

“Oh, can I do anything to make it better?” she touched his back. He turned and smiled her.

“I doubt that, since you are problem and you persist in trying to drive me crazy with your seduction.”

“Ah, now I know what is wrong. You are just being horny. There I was thinking you were upset about something serious. Adrian, really.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” He scratched his chin, his eyes burning with desire.

“Since we find ourselves all alone, why don’t you leave that kettle and come and visit me in my tent? I could do with some company.”

She tilted her head and smiled at him. He grabbed her hand and led her to her tent. “Right, that does it. I have had enough of this.”

When they got inside, he grabbed her pants and swiped the zipper open in a swift, hard flick. “Take all this stuff off now.”

She stepped back from and watched him for a moment. She slowly pulled down her pants and smiled slightly at him. She bit a lip lightly. Adrian snapped. He stepped closer to her and lifted her face. He parted her lips with his tongue and kissed her. He pushed further and kissed her hard. He grabbed her underwear and she placed her hands on his to stop him. “Adrian, calm down. No sweet seduction?”

“Take off your shirt. I only have two hands, woman and no patience.” Her body, consistent in its loyalty to his needs, responded quickly to him.

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It was getting dark when Frances emerged from the tent. Adrian was fast asleep and she did not wake him. She carefully closed the tent and went to check if anyone had returned from other camp. She met one of the staff at the pub, who told her that the team had said they would have dinner at the other camp. Frances was relieved, because she would have Adrian to herself the whole night. She made coffee and went back to the tent. She sat on the porch and watched the night sky as it crept slowly in the horizon. Her cell phone was ringing and she ran inside to answer it. *Shit, that will definitely wake him up.* She rummaged through her bag to find it, but it seemed to have fallen to the bottom of the bag. By the time she got to it, it had stopped ringing. She looked at the number and saw that it was her parents. *I have to call them back now before they panic about me.* She was stepping outside when she heard Adrian. “Frances, stay, don’t go.” His eyes were closed and she was not sure if he was dreaming. She leaned down and looked at him. “Adrian?” “Come back to bed.” She went to him and curled up next to him.

“Who is calling you in the middle of the night?” He didn’t open his eyes, but she was sure he was awake now.

“It is not the middle of the night. It is six o’ clock and we are not in ‘bed’. We are in tent. Adrian, go back to sleep.”

He opened his eyes and mumbled. "Where is everybody?"

"They phoned to say they will come back later and that we must have dinner without them."

"Good. Now come sleep with me and switch off that damned phone."

"Oh, stop being such a grouch." She kissed his cheek and snuggled closer. Adrian held her tight and groaned. She lay next to him and she stroked his hair. He seemed to enjoy that and nestled himself closer to her.

After a long while, he woke up and seemed in a better frame of mind.

"Hello, temptress, still working your magic on me?"

"Of course. Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, was I awful?"

"A little. Are you hungry?"

"Hmm. Yes, let's go and get something to eat."

He phoned Kevin to check if they were alright and he told her that Kevin sounded drunk and incomprehensible. After a quick meal, they went back to her tent and sat outside, enjoying the night sky. Adrian walked up to her and held her. "Since we got here, I have wanted to hold in the moonlight. I don't know why, but I needed to do this."

"Hmm, very nice."

"I want to go to bed early tonight, so I can take you for a long walk in the wilderness tomorrow. It will be good for us to see it together, okay?"

"Fine, but not too long."

He went to his tent and returned a little later. He had turned off all the gas lamps, except one for the drunken party. When he entered the tent, Frances was lying stark naked on the bunk, waiting for him. He stopped and looked at her, pleasantly surprised.

"Take off your clothes Adrian. I want to feel your flesh against my skin."

He smiled suddenly. He had been right about her. She was a little wild and he liked it.

*Well, if she insists, my flesh is what she is going to get.*

That night, they made love slowly, quietly. She heard their gentle movement against the soft sound of the wind.

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Adrian woke her early in the morning, telling her to get ready for the walk. “But it is dark outside!”

“Come Frances or I will carry you. Now, I am going to get dressed, and I will fetch you in a few minutes.”

He left her still trying to negotiate out of it and checked to see if his team had returned. Only Gwen’s vehicle was there and he wondered what time the rest of them would arrive. He went and had a shower and as he was making his way to Frances’s tent, he saw Gwen coming out of Greg’s tent. She stopped when she saw him, but he just smiled and waved at her. He continued to walk on, knowing she would be embarrassed if he went to talk to her. Clearly he had not been the only one who didn’t sleep in his tent last night. He laughed to himself. *These greenies are quite a horny bunch. Just look at Frances, waiting naked for me.*

Frances was ready when he returned. She was not prepared to put up with his impatient foot-tapping and pacing while she dressed. They went into the wilderness and it was a beautiful wholesome experience for both of them. They did not talk to each other, but enjoyed the silence of their communication. When they returned to the camp a few hours later, all the members of their team were bustling around, some looking worse for wear.

“Have you guys eaten already?”

“Yeah, of course. We were hardly going to wait for you. We know that you take hours out there.” Kevin was laughing.

“Frances, was he a brute out there, making you walk for hours with no rest, no food or no water?”

“No, he was perfectly civilized. It was a wonderful walk. Did you guys have a good time last night?”

“Oh don’t ask. We had too much to drink and Gwen drove us back.”

Adrian went to Gwen and hugged her. “Poor Gwen, did they give you a hard time?”

She just smiled. “No, it was fine.”

“Are you alright?” he asked her softly.

“Yes, thank you, Adrian.”

“Oh Adrian, don’t treat her like that. The next thing she will be asking for special women privileges. This gentle stuff is not going to help us men in the long run.” Greg was laughing as Gwen shot him a cold stare.

“So, what did you guys do last night?”

“I slept most of the afternoon and we had a quiet dinner. There was no noise, no arguing and no politics. It was very pleasant, even for Frances here.”

“Yes, I had a chance to feel like I was alone here. It was magical.”

Adrian smiled, *yes, especially when I took you outside and made you cry out for me in the moonlight. Magical indeed.*

Frances was reluctant to leave the Kenton Park. It was beautiful and warm and she felt close to Adrian out there in the bush. Adrian drove home slowly and they did not talk much. He put on some music and when they got to her apartment, he asked, “Frances, do you want me to take you to your parents now?”

“No! Gosh! Not now. You have just driven for four hours. Adrian, it is okay. I will just drive down one day in the week. Are you coming in?”

“Yes and you are going to get whatever you need. We are going to my house tonight.”

“Okay, thanks for discussing it with me.”

“Just did. Do you want coffee?”

“No, I had better pack these things away.”

They settled in for a quiet night at Adrian’s house.

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### Chapter 3

Adrian watched her as he walked into the room. Her back was straight and taut, her jaw set as if she was about to start a war. She was wearing the black suit pants he disliked so much. He hated the way it shaped her too neatly and the way men's eyes followed her buttocks when she walked. She knew he hated it and also knew she only wore it to annoy him. She perched herself on the seat and immediately took control of everyone in the room.

“Gentlemen, I believe this sudden meeting was inevitable. I am only available for one hour, so please, can we confine ourselves to the relevant issues? Thank you.”

Kevin cleared his throat. “Okaay, it seems we have hit a snag on one issue. Your Party is trying to create obstacles for us. We have tried four times this week to set up a meeting with you, but have been told you were out of town, not available, or something like that. Now you know that we need to finalize these plans for the development within the week. Also, we have it on good authority that your plan (or rather your Party's plan) is simply to ‘indulge us until we move on to something more political correct’. We regret that this is your view. We want this project, not for political reasons, but because we believe in the project. When we tried to get somebody to fill in for you, we were told we had to speak to you. Since we could not contact you until Adrian got you last night, I can't see how that suggestion helped.”

Her colleague Charles looked quite amazed. *Who is putting a stop to the project?* Everybody wanted it, precisely for the political reasons they so vigorously denied.

“Well, I am sure that you are mistaken. We are very keen to have the project completed as soon as possible. We have absolutely no reason to ‘indulge you’.

“Yes, I am sure that you men are fully aware that I am very busy. Right at the beginning, I did warn you of my time constraints, but you insisted on involving me. So, I hate to refute your good authority, but I for one have neither the time nor the energy to indulge you. But I see that it must be frustrating for you to have to wait for me each time you want to thrust forward with the work. I think the solution is very simple. Charles will send somebody else to replace me and I will assist whenever it is absolutely necessary. I do not wish to stand in the way of progress. I have my own problems and can't be at your beck and call whenever you have an urge or desire to do something sexy with the project. I am not available in the way that you desire.”

Kevin watched her. She was talking in such a double-edged, sexual way, that he couldn't tell whether she was manipulating them or whether she simply spoke this way out of habit. She seemed a little tense today, not her usual friendly self. His sources said she was having an affair with some new man who seemed to have caught her attention. She did not look like a woman in love. She looked like a woman about to go to war. Also, he had deliberately tried to bait her when he said he had it on 'good authority' that she was playing stalling games. She hadn't even flinched. She had seemed as surprised as everyone else. *Maybe I misunderstood my sources.*

Adrian listened carefully as she spoke. He hated the way she would talk to everyone in the room and also to him on a personal level at the same time. She had avoided him for almost two weeks now and he had insisted on the meeting, just to see her. He missed her, the feel and smell of her. But he heard what she was saying to him. *I will not be with you. Go away.* His clenched his fists as he listened to her, speaking down to him as if he was a child.

"That is not negotiable. We made a deal. If you want out, then we all want out, unless you are willing to fill us in on why you want to run away. What hidden monsters have you waiting for us at the next turn? What surprises or dramas do you have in store for us? No, we will not fall for that old trick. You lead us along, pretending you were on board with us. Now you want to slip away quietly and drop your bomb on us. No, that is not negotiable."

"I am very sorry to see that you still believe we have some terrible, evil motives. I hate to disappoint you, but we want the same things as you and we would not be foolish enough to jeopardize it. But I think it is your own mistrust that is creating the problem. I told you that I had problems with my availability. I can't really drop my whole life to 'indulge' you every time you have some notion or idea. If we are to meet, then it must be in a structured way. These meetings to suit your whim and fancy are not acceptable or feasible. We are all busy people and have other interests to protect. You must realize that. I am suggesting that we deal with the matter on this basis. We set up a weekly meeting at some place (you can choose) and proceed from there. At least Charles and I and the rest of our team will know in advance when to make ourselves available. Also, we need to structure the issues for discussion, so we don't just wonder along in a haze. Well, what do you think?"

Kevin was too afraid to talk. What was Adrian on about? He made it sound like he had been personally rejected and that they really believed she could not be trusted. They had discussed the issue and had agreed that whatever the Party might be up to, she was principled enough to see the project through. There had never been a suggestion that she was the problem. Adrian was taking this all too personally.

“Well, I see where you are going with that. You are right, of course. We have been demanding and a little pushy with you. I accept that. I like your idea that we meet once a week. Since most of the technical staff and documentation is here in our building, I propose we meet here every Monday morning from 8 -10, until construction commences. Everyone agreed?”

They all agreed.

Charles watched his friend and colleague. He seemed to have missed a whole level of this war. She was so tense and inflexible today. He had been as surprised by her today as he had been when she gave him new number to contact her at, saying she would be away to deal with a personal matter. She had phoned him every day, ensuring that everything ran smoothly on their various projects together. However, she had flatly refused to deal with the Wilderness Project, saying they were too demanding. *Okay, so they admit it.* But he wondered about her new approach to this. She had simply run away from it. That was not her style. She was a fighter and usually forged straight ahead in times of adversity. *Well, he sighed, her strategy seems to have worked. Kevin is certainly not as uptight as he has been in the last two weeks.* She seemed to have reasoned with him and he was happy. Everyone seemed to accept the new arrangement, except Adrian. Charles watched how he seemed to get tenser as she spoke and how he clearly did not like the new arrangement. *Everybody says he is a control freak. This clearly will not allow him to summon everybody at his 'whim and fancy' as Frances said. She is right, of course.* He hoped that Adrian would not be too much of a problem for Frances. She hated to be controlled and she was making that very clear to him today. Adrian was not a happy man.

Adrian was definitely not a happy man. He watched her hands as they moved when she spoke. As much as he hated to admit it, she had dominance of their relationship now. He had initially been the one in control, even in bed, or so he thought. Perhaps she was simply

biding her time before she got her claws into him. *She had been careful and predatory with me*, he thought. *She had whimpered and cried and submitted so deliciously to me in our loving making. She had created a false sense of security for me. Then one day, she had turned on me like a spitting cobra.*

Remembered the day all too well. He had walked into her apartment and he knew from her face that she was going to have her way with him. She had moved to him, pulled off his shirt and had seduced him so aggressively and passionately, that he had simply relaxed on his back and enjoyed it. He had liked the way she had refused to talk or allow him to touch her. She had completely and totally made love to him and then fell asleep. He had felt rejected afterwards and he had a strong feeling that she was making some statement to him. He realized now that he should never have submitted to her. It had changed everything. When he had tried to talk to her later, she had simply nodded at him, saying nothing. She had smiled politely at his jokes and answered all his questions in her strategic, guarded way. If he did not know better, she was trying to behave like the stereotype of a man. But he had dismissed the thought. He assumed she was pre-occupied with work, or something else. He had tried to leave early in the morning, kissing her good bye. She had woken up and called his name.

“Adrian, why are you leaving?”

She had sounded so hurt and angry that he had backtracked and sat on the bed next to her.

“You don’t seem in the mood for me, so I thought I should leave you to whatever occupies you so much. Are you okay?”

“No, I have been under so much pressure lately. I am sorry I was so bad yesterday.”

He remembered so well how she had blushed and he had relaxed.

“Adrian, hold me please.”

He had held her, comforted by the fact that she seemed her usual self again.

She had not behaved that way again, but he knew that something in her had changed. She was more guarded in the things she said to him and was careful to show him that she was in control. When he suggested a restaurant, she would insist on a different one. When he suggested they meet at his place, she would insist that they meet at hers. He did not understand it, since he knew she was a fair-minded person not likely to play petty games. Then one day, two weeks ago, she had told him that she would no longer be available, that

things had to end. She had hung up before he could reply. He could not contact her or find her at home. He went crazy trying to find her and even Kevin, who had all sorts of means of finding missing persons, seemed at a loss about where she was. Then suddenly, last night, she had answered her phone and she had spoken to him as if nothing had happened. He wanted to talk to her and he was desperate to get an explanation from her.

“Adrian, Adrian?”

“Yes, I agree,” he simply said. “If this is over then I have matters to attend to. So I will see you on Monday.”

He left the room before anybody could leave. He went to his office and shut the door. *Okay, she has won the second round.* Now, he would get her to submit completely to him. He had enough of her nonsense now. He was glad he had simply walked out and curbed his urge to talk to her afterwards. She would be expecting him to do that and he knew now, from experience with her, that the element of surprise always threw her off balance. He was simply going to let her wonder off, thinking he accepted her behavior and then he could take her back, when she felt a false sense of security. *So she wants to play games? Let the games begin.*

Frances was devastated that he had simply left like that. She had hoped for an opportunity to speak to him and to look into his eyes. She missed the way they lit up when she said something funny. *It is for the best,* she sighed. *I can't be with him and that's it. With time, I can do this.* Maybe by having regular professional meetings, her heart would quieten down at the sight of him and her body would calm its flame of desire. Maybe, just maybe, the lust and warmth she felt when she was with him would evaporate as quickly as it had risen. She was not to be with him. She could not trust him and she was so hurt by the fact that he was spying on her. She hated herself for believing in him, for trusting him so easily when she had no reason to. He was the enemy and she had under-estimated how far he would go to get his precious Wilderness Project. She had never imagined that they would bug her phone. She felt angry and hurt, but she also longed to be with him. She wanted to demand an explanation from him and anything he would have said would have pacified her. *On a positive note, he has saved me from making a further fool of myself. It is for the best.*

She got up and tried to leave, but Kevin stopped her. “I need to talk to you for a bit.”

“Sure, what is the problem?”

“I don’t know how to say this. But Adrian is not a man to play games with. He never forgives or forgets. He is vicious when attacked, so I am just telling you that it is not wise to simply indulge him. He will not go away. He will get this project going, with or without you. I hope we understand each other.”

“No, we don’t. I have no idea where you get this notion that we are trying to play games with him. You see, I have as much to lose as he has if this doesn’t work out. I convinced the Party, against its wishes, to give the project a chance. Now where would that leave me if it failed? Kevin, your lack of trust and confidence in me is expected in the circumstances, but I hope you have the wherewithal to deal with this situation on the facts before you, not your ‘good authority’ or habitual responses. ‘Good authority’ is sometimes not what it appears to be. Sometimes it is there to confuse things, don’t you agree? Be careful of your sources, because they might not have your best interests at heart. So, now, do we understand each other?”

“Well, alright. I see what you mean. I did not mean to sound so pompous, but Adrian can be very evil when pushed. I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Thanks for the warning. Now I really have to go.”

Frances left the building, thinking how arrogant it was of Kevin to try and use information he had heard on her phone to advance their case. Unfortunately for him, he had misunderstood the conversation. She had been talking to Charles about indulging the ogre, an old man who complained all the time about something. He must have assumed they were talking about Adrian. *This is a very destructive process, because he is going to use information that comes to him in an illicit way to gain an advantage in the meetings. What can I do to stop it? Should I accuse him and see what happens? No, he will simply deny it. Should I have the bug removed? No, he will just find another way to bug me.* It was better this way, but she had to find a way to use it to her advantage. She was getting angry as she drove away, remembering how Adrian never phoned at her home phone and always called her on her cell phone. She had not been sure that he was involved in the spying, until two weeks ago when he had phoned her and asked how she was. She had chatted a bit and he had said he was worried about her, because she sounded ‘iffy’. She had been shocked by this, because that is the exact word she had used when she had spoken to Jamie earlier that morning. *That bastard, how could he?* She had seen him that night and

had made love to him in her anger and betrayal. She was even more angered by how calculating he had been. He had never said anything which indicated that he also listened to her calls. He had been very careful not to let her know and she marveled at his control. When she had spoken to her friend about this man she was in love with, he never used it, or the discussion that they had had about him. He had simply ignored it. She wondered why he had bothered to be with her. Was it lust? Was it an attempt to get into her house to place the bug? Was it simply a question of keeping your enemies close? He did not seem to be bothered that she knew. She had made it clear in the meeting that his behavior was unacceptable, but he seemed to simply take it in his stride. *That damn, mean, evil, politician!* What could she do?

She decided that her best defense was to use their bugging device against them. She would simply feed them information that was totally false and that would harm them. The only way they would stop was if it hurt them more than it hurt her. *I will start with Kevin.*

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On Monday, at seven-thirty in the morning, she phoned her cousin Jamie. She deliberately used the landline. “Jamie, how are you? How is your new love?”

“Hi Frances. Gosh, this is an early call. Where have you been? There have all sorts of cute men looking for you. Monique is fine and totally hot in the bedroom. I don’ know about conversation though. She sort of thinks that’s my job. But we shall see. Anyway, tell me where you have been.”

“I just needed some time out. Things got a little tense with my ... friend and I wanted to get some fresh air. I had a few projects to finish, so I wondered around the country finalizing things. Anyway, what cute men were looking for me?”

“Some guy Adrian called twice, asking where you were. He got my number from Charles. Then he just pitched up at my office. He seemed quite desperate to get hold of you.”

“Oh, that guy. I am doing a project with him. He is a bit demanding. He is the deputy-minister of environmental affairs from the NLP. He seems to think we work for them. I’ve saw this week, so that is all under control.”

“Okay, but next time, let me know when you are going away. I was getting worried and your cell phone was off. I suppose you got my thousand messages. How is the mystery man?”

“He will remain a mystery, I’m afraid. He turned out to be creep who was just great in bed. At least I got the great sex. Anyway, I phoned you about two things. First, I am sorry I didn’t call or get back to you. My cell phone was giving me hassles. Second, I need some advice. I have in my possession information that is sensitive and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Okay, you sound a bit worried.”

“Yep. There is this guy from the opposition party. We are working on that project I was talking about. He is the Chief Executive of Environmental Affairs. He is this young, good-looking guy. He has a wife and two children, I think. Yesterday, I received documents, in the form of affidavits from three pretty young men accusing him of sexual harassment. One of them goes as far to suggest he was almost raped him. He managed to escape when there was a noise. Now, what do I do about this?”

“Ooooh, this sound terrible. Well, who are the guys?”

“They are all men on his side of the political fence. I had to check on one that I don’t know. But they are his people. My first thought was that someone put them up to it, but on careful reading of the documents, it seems they might be telling the truth. Also, they are his people and they say they are too afraid to tell anyone in their Party, because he has huge power.”

“What do they want you to do?”

“That’s the weird thing. They want to sit down with him and tell him to stop. They don’t want a politically embarrassing situation, I guess. They only want him to stop.”

“Okay, so I believe them. If they were setting him up, they would want to go public. They are clearly victims.”

“Unless they think I will go public for them?”

“No, you are well-known for your integrity. They would have sent it to one of your guys to use if they wanted to. They want you to stop him.”

“That’s the problem. We are doing this project together. They don’t trust me, least of all him. He thinks I am trying to pull some stunt. How do I approach a man who basically hates me with these accusations?”

“Okay, I see your point. The only answer is to tell them that you are not in the position to help them and refer them to a lawyer. I am sure he will definitely stop after that. It is not your problem. Refer them elsewhere.”

She was silent for a while.

“Yes, you are right. I will send them to one of my feminist friends who know how to deal with harassers. Gosh Jamie, isn't it awful? I wonder how many other men have been his victim. I wonder how often it happens.”

“I was just thinking how hard it must have been for them to say anything. Men don't admit to these things easily, so it must have been desperate. I wonder how they got together or found out about each other.”

“I don't know. I don't really want to know. I think I will drop off the documents with a friend this morning and see what she thinks. That way, it is out of my hands. Thanks once again for the help, my star-shine.”

“Anytime. Now, tell me more about the creep with great sex.”

“I don't know. I thought he was great. He comes across as kind and sweet, but then I discovered that he was just trying to find out stuff from me. It serves me right for allowing my hormones to take over. I feel awful, you know, because I really liked him, the way he made me laugh... But now, I look at him and I see nothing but the devil. The problem is that my hormones are still in control. I actually considered jumping him the other day when we met accidentally. I thought, what the hell, just one more time.”

“Oh baby you have got it bad. Keep your pants on. If he is a creep already, then he will be a worse creep when he discovers your hormone weakness. Keep your pants on!”

“Okay, okay, I get it. Thanks. I needed to hear that. I had better go. I have the misfortune of having a meeting with Mr. Harassment in a few minutes.”

“Okay, bye and be careful.”

“Bye.”

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Frances drove to the meeting feeling a little apprehensive. She was not looking forward to seeing Adrian or Kevin and hated the thought that Adrian would simply ignore her or walk out. He had not phoned her the whole weekend, clearly still upset with her. She wondered whether he had been relieved that she had said it was over. After all, he had gotten into her apartment and had planted the bug. What else did he need from her? Her throat was dry at the thought that she was beginning to fall in love with him. She had started to relax around him and was enjoying him coming over and surprising her with his spontaneous insanity. How could he turn out to be one of those creeps? *I suppose that is why he was so good in bed. He was working his magic.* She wished she could talk to him and ask him how he was able to pretend to care and be so intimate and involved when they made love. She wanted to know why he continued to see her, when all he needed was to visit her once. Why had he kept up the charade of lust and passion?

She waited in her car a few minutes, trying to collect her thoughts. She did not want to be early and face the risk of meeting him alone. She went upstairs and was relieved to find him leaning over some maps, chatting to Charles. When she walked in, he smiled politely at her and continued talking. Her heart was banging against her chest and she quietly found a seat far away from them. Others starting walking in and Charles sat next to her.

Kevin breezed into the room, his head down and sat across from her. He looked uncomfortable and she was pleased.

They discussed a range of matters and Frances soon got into the swing of the meeting. She was explaining, how, if the cottages were cleverly concealed behind some trees, nobody would see anything from the Wilderness Area.

“That, at least will keep the guests safe in the knowledge that wilderness wanderers could not see what naughty things they were up to. The best plan is to keep the developments concealed and out of the eye of the public.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? If anybody in this room has anything defamatory to say about me, they must tell me. I will sue anybody who dares to defame me. Frances, what does that mean? I want to know!”

Kevin was on his feet. He was angry and agitated. He suddenly realized that everyone was staring at him. His outburst was completely out of character for him, a quiet, ‘behind the scenes’ man. He was a strategist, not a bully. Everyone was perplexed by his outburst.

Frances cleared her throat. “Look as I said before. This conspiracy theory is getting out of hand. Kevin, please tell me what you are on about. I was talking about cottages. What are you attacking me about now?”

“All I am saying is that if anyone has anything to say about me, I want to know. For the record, I also want to say that I do not hate you, no matter what anybody thinks.”

Adrian had been watching the exchange. He felt his blood pressure rising at Kevin’s unsolicited assault on Frances. He had watched her recoil in shock and he wanted to walk up to her and hold her. She sat there, staring at Kevin, looking shocked and horrified.

*What is wrong with the boy? He is not getting any better. The more he speaks, the more he targets Frances. He suddenly realized it was time to bring Kevin in line. Nobody is going to treat Frances like that and get away with it.*

“Okay, I think it is time for a break. We need to re-group. Chair, if you don’t mind, I need to meet with my team.”

Everybody was relieved at this opportunity to get out of the room. Kevin was looking crazed and Frances shocked.

Charles was worried now. He had under-estimated the level of hostility that Kevin harbored against Frances. He seemed convinced that she was the evil one. *He is just a sexist pig. He can’t cope with the fact that a woman has saved their project.* He would speak to Adrian about bringing his sexist boys in line. *Frances is not to be treated this way.*

“Okay, we will adjourn for 20 minutes. Let’s get some tea.”

Frances was a little shaken by two things. Firstly, she had never been absolutely sure that her phone was tapped until this moment. She felt invaded and alone and wanted to run away from the room. But the second shock was the expression on Adrian’s face when it happened. He had turned to her and looked at her so tenderly and protectively. He looked like he would come to her and for a split second she thought he would. *Now how is that possible? What did he care?* She stayed in her chair shocked and confused, as Adrian stormed out of the room with Kevin and the rest of them close on his heels. He looked like he would kill someone and they were all pretty pleased they were not Kevin at that moment. It had been thoroughly embarrassing to them all.

Charles was worried about Frances. She was simply sitting in her chair, not moving, staring ahead of her. He went to her and touched her shoulder.

“Frances are you okay? I am really sorry. I did not realize what a pig that guy is. Don’t worry, I will speak to Adrian. Frances?”

“Yes, thank you, I am fine. I just needed a moment to collect myself. I am just fine. Come let’s get some tea.”

They went out to get tea and could hear Adrian shouting down the passage. They could not hear his words, but his angry voice shot through the air to them.

“Charles, I just don’t know what to do. I don’t even know the guy. I have never worked with him. But from day one he has gone on and on about my evil intentions. What can do to make it easier for us all? Should I withdraw?”

“No! That is not acceptable. If he wants to misbehave, then he must leave. If there are any further outbursts, then I will insist he leaves. Frances, it is not your fault. We have a principle here. We can’t let sexist men dictate how we do business. You found the solution and you must see it through. If there are further problems with him, then I will get him removed.”

When they returned to the meeting, it was clear that Kevin had been severely chastised. He apologized to the meeting and to Frances and promised that it would not happen again. “I am sorry. I was worried about something else. It is not Frances’s fault. I just lost my cool. Frances, once again, I am sorry.”

She simply nodded. *Got you, you fuck*. She looked around the room and saw how everyone had turned against Kevin, especially in his own team. They glared at him in shame and horror as if he was branded with a contagious disease. The meeting proceeded in a subdued manner after that. When she was about to leave, Adrian came to her.

“Frances, I would like to talk to you privately, please.”

“Okay, but I am in a bit of a hurry. Can we do it some other time?”

“No, now. I won’t keep you. I just need to clear some things between you and Kevin so this won’t happen again. Let’s go to my office.”

Charles was listening.

“Yes, please Adrian. You need to keep that boy under control. Frances is too precious to us to allow that to happen again. So Frances, talk to the man. I will see you later. Remember, I am buying you lunch today.”

“Okay, Charles, I’ll see you later.”

She left with Adrian to his office. When they were out of earshot, he gently asked her, “are you okay?”

“Yes, I am fine, thank you.”

“Frances, I am very sorry about that. It was totally unacceptable.”

“Fine, it’s over now. Let’s get this discussion over so I can go back to work, where people are normal and conversation is safe.”

“Ouch, that was uncalled for. But I forgive you since you’ve had a bit of a nasty experience.”

“How nice of you to forgive me.”

He was about to say something, when he realized his secretary was standing at the door of his office. She must have heard the commotion and wanted to know what it was about. Adrian glared at her and she knew better than to ask. He walked passed her to his office and offered Frances a seat.

“Okay, my dear. Now tell me what is going on.”

“I don’t know. It is your people who are trying to pick a fight. I know that you have no reason to trust me, but I also think you have absolutely no reason to distrust me either. I don’t know why you need to hate me. I don’t know any of you. I don’t know what you want from me. I offered to get off the Project, but you insisted I stay. I don’t know what you want.”

Adrian was staring at her. She seemed so distraught. He moved towards her, but stopped himself. This was not the time to think about her and the short lilac dress creeping up her legs.

“Look, I know that there is more to it than you are saying. Kevin tells me that you are out to get him that you will destroy his career. What is that about?”

“Adrian, why are you asking me these questions? I don’t know the man. I met him on this project. Why do you ask me these questions?”

Adrian watched her confusion. She was genuinely confused and seemed to be losing control. He watched with a morbid fascination as the tears formed in her eyes. He went to her and pulled her out of the chair.

“Frances, don’t cry. We can sort this out. I promise.”

She did not resist him and her arms found their way around his waist. “Oh Adrian, tell me, why do you ask me these questions? What games are you playing now?”

She felt his back stiffen as she said that. He lifted her face and looked at her. “Frances, we are not going to fight, okay? I want to know what is going on. Now, will you tell me without the snide suggestions? What was Kevin talking about?”

His voice was quieter now.

“No, Adrian, we will not fight. I think you should ask Kevin what is talking about. I have made no accusations. He has. I will not defend myself in this way.”

She pulled away from him, suddenly realizing that she had been clinging to him. Adrian let her go reluctantly. “Okay, sit down and I will call Kevin. We will get to the bottom of this.”

He went to his phone and called Kevin. Within minutes Kevin walked into the office, far more composed than he had been when he left the meeting. He stared at Frances sitting in the chair and she saw a flicker of fear cross his face. *What is he afraid of?*

“Kevin, I want you to explain what happened in there.

Kevin was looking at Frances. *Has she told him about the men? No. Shit, is she going to tell him now that I am here? What will he say? Adrian is loyal but he will go mad if he hears anything about harassment. There will be absolutely no use in defending myself. Adrian will never trust me again. Also my outburst today has not helped matters.*

He looked at her and was amazed at her serene composure. That was thing thing that drove him crazy earlier. She had sat there so calmly as if she knew nothing. It had driven him mad. He would never touch another man, in fact, he was a bit homophobic. How could he refute the lies?

“Okay, I just lost my temper. I guess I was worried about personal stuff.”

“No Kevin, spare me the official story. Your accusations were specific and directed at Frances. Now talk.”

Kevin felt trapped. *So he doesn't know about the allegations yet. Okay, so far so good.*

“I heard from good authority that Frances thinks she knows things about me. Those things are not true. I was agitated, because I think that Frances should come to me if she hears things about me. I was also informed that she thinks I hate her. Frances, I don't hate you. Really, I mean that.”

“What things?” Adrian was agitated.

“I would rather not say.”

They were silent for a while.

“Who is your source, Kevin that you rely on so heavily?” Frances asked sweetly.

“I would rather not say.”

“So your position is that you attacked me about things you will not say from a source you cannot disclose? What is the point of this discussion?”

Kevin ran his finger through his hair. *Okay, all I have to do is stall her. She is not going to attack or tell.*

“Look. Yes, I have a good source.”

“Adrian, I am sure you mean well. But it is clear to me that Kevin here is playing games. I am still not in the position to deal with unspecified allegations from unknown sources. This is all made up. You just wanted to get to me, didn't you? Tell me this. Right from the beginning, I came in to try and save the project. Why do you want me out?”

“I don't want you out. I know you have tried to help us.”

“So why try to derail the meeting with spurious outburst? Don't you want the project to succeed?”

“No! Of course I want it to succeed! It will be marvelous.”

“So, what was the motive in that little stunt?”

“No motive, I told you. I just think you should tell me about it.”

“About what, Kevin? What do you want me to tell you?”

“Well, tell me who they are.”

“Who?”

“Don’t do this to me, Frances. Don’t make me say it. I know that you have in your possession documents. Don’t make me say it.”

Frances got out of her chair. “Okay, I have had enough of this. More allegations from a reliable source. I think it is time I went back to work. This is just a cheap game, which only serves to offend me. I will say this, Kevin, in the presence of Adrian. I am convinced that you have no basis for your outburst and it was motivated by some bizarre malice against me. However, if there are any other allegations or accusations from an unknown source in the future, I will force you to reveal it all in court.”

She looked at her watch.

“No,” Adrian said. He was staring at her. He knew she knew something, because she had not pursued the question on the actual allegations. *If she didn’t know, she would have at least wanted to know that. So she is not being entirely honest. What is she up to?*

“What are the allegations and who is the source? Kevin, I want to know. My project is not going to be jeopardized by some game the two of you are playing. Now, tell me.”

“Adrian, I want to start out by saying that there is absolutely no basis for the allegations. I swear I am innocent. Well, there is talk that I sort of, well, sexually harassed some of our male staff. You know I would never do that. I would never touch another man. I love my wife. So that is why I was so angry.”

“Sexual harassment? Who is the victim?”

“I don’t know, ask Frances. She knows all about it.”

“Really, what are you talking about? Why should I know anything about it? Who told you that I have anything to do with that?”

“Frances, please, I know that you know. At this stage, I have been led to believe that you have their statements in your possession. So you know more than me.”

“Kevin, are you mad? Why would someone come to me? I hardly know you! Why would they confide in me?”

“Frances, please, help me. Tell me their names at least. I need to know.”

“Tell me your source and then I can work out what is really going on here.”

“No.”

“Okay, so this is still part of the game. Don’t insult my intelligence, Kevin. You now say I know who they are, have documents and all this comes from someone whom I don’t know. Tell me, Kevin, what exactly do you want from me?”

“I want you to tell me, Frances, because I know that you know about it.”

“Kevin, it means one of two things. You made this up, I don’t know why, or your source is setting you up to fail. Now, what is it?”

“My source is very reliable.”

“Trust me, it is not. If that is the information you are getting, your source is just going to destroy you. Now, is there a source, or are you playing more games?”

Kevin looked defeated now. Then his eyes flashed, recognition dawning on his face. *Shit, she has set me up. She knew she was bugged. She knew I would not be able to resist. And she has forced me to make the false allegations about myself. She has not admitted or denied them. She has forced me to accuse myself of harassing men at work. Oh God! She has tricked me into destroying myself.*

He stared at her. *Now she wants me to reveal, in Adrian’s presence, that I bugged her. No! There is no chance of that. Adrian will kick me out.*

“Look I must be going mad. There is no source. Yes, I admit that I wanted to get back at you. The project is very special to me. This beautiful woman comes into the room, takes over the project and it all suddenly makes sense. How do you think I felt? Adrian, I wanted it to be our project. It was our idea. I did not want an intruder to seduce us into doing it on her terms. Adrian, Frances is right. I made it up. There are no allegations, no source. Frances, I am terribly sorry. What I have done was evil. I am sorry that I invaded you in that way. I am sorry. Will you forgive me?”

Adrian was staring at him, then at Frances.

“Kevin, you accused yourself falsely of sexual harassment, in order to get at Frances? Is that what you are telling me?”

“Yes, Adrian. I know it sounds crazy. I know. Frances, will you forgive me?”

“On condition it never happens again. If there is even a hint of funny business, I swear I will play hardball. I don’t like what you did, Kevin. If it happens again, I will fight you in ways you have not even imagined. Now, tell me, are you alone in this scheme?”

“Yes, yes.”

Frances looked at Adrian. He clearly had no clue what was going on. Or was he simply playing along? *I don’t know*, she thought *and I probably will never know*.

She left the offices feeling tired and confused. What was Adrian’s role in these horrible political games? She could have sworn that he did not know, but then, she could never be sure. She reminded herself that she was his enemy and he wanted the project very badly.

Adrian was also confused. He was sure that Frances knew more about Kevin’s allegations that she was letting on. She had not even raised an eyebrow when he made the revelation. Also, she kept saying things to him, about his sources. He knew she was threatening him about something and it was serious. He had never seen Kevin as afraid as he had been today. Was she blackmailing him? Why? To get him to do what she wanted in the project? What did she have on him? Was he harassing his staff? It seemed a very strange allegation to make without a basis. He would have to watch him more carefully with the young men. Why had Frances not simply told him about it? If Kevin was misbehaving, why did she not simply come to him? Why had she suddenly turned away from him? He knew today that she still wanted him. He had felt it when she instinctively wrapped her arms around him. She had forgotten for a moment that she had refused to see him. He wondered about that and was feeling like a blind man wandering around a new and strange city. Why had Frances run away from him? He had assumed that he could simply make her wait long enough and she would come running to him, but he knew he was not going to wait for that. He wanted her and on some level, he did not even care if she was blackmailing Kevin. After all, he reasoned with himself, if Kevin was behaving that way, he deserved whatever he got. He wanted to see Frances so desperately now. He wished he had not held her in his arms. That had killed all his resolve to play power games with her. Why was she running from him? Why had she looked at him so confused and hurt when she spoke to Kevin? Adrian was too confused and unsettled to work.

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He left his office and went to visit his sister at her flower shop. She chatted to him and accused him of not listening and then he took her out to lunch.

“So, Adrian, tell me, bro, what’s up?”

“Oh nothing. Just the usual.”

“Oh really, so since when is it usual for you to visit me in the day when it is not my birthday?”

“Oh, I just needed your calm, reasonable company. Things are completely crazy at work. Kevin is losing his marbles and driving all of us insane.”

“Who is she?”

He laughed, “okay, she is in the opposition. I have no clue what is going on. I could have sworn that we were doing very well and then one day, she simply walked out on me and disappeared for a while. I saw her today, at work and I felt the most awful pain. I really wanted to drag her out of that meeting and ....”

“Okay, I get the picture. Why did she run away from you?”

“I don’t know. She won’t speak to me. She has been acting strange lately and I just don’t know what is going on. Tracy, I tell you, when we are together it is magic, true magic. So, what should I do?”

“Hamm, well, you should at least try to find out what the problem is. It might be something simple, like, you know, you are the opposition and that it would be awful for both of you if someone found out. Is that not a good reason?”

“Yes, a good reason, but we never talked about it.”

“Never?”

“No, we have simply avoided the topic. What can I say? We should not be together, but hell, I want it to gone on forever?”

“Yes, but don’t you think it would be better if the two of you at least discussed it? Hear how she feels, Adrian? That is a good starting point in dealing with a woman. Hear what she has to say.”

“Okay, don’t patronize me. Anyway, how is your young man?”

“Terry is doing fine, thank you. Still trying to get me to get married and I tell him I will when his mother dies. He laughs because he thinks I am joking!”

“Tracy, you are so wicked. How can you tell a man you will only marry him when his mother dies? He accepts that?”

“Yes, anyway, you haven’t met his mother. She is Cruella Devil. He knows it too. But I think I will eventually give in. That woman will probably live till 120, just to spite me.”

He was laughing so hard that he did not notice Frances and Charles walking past their table. “Adrian, good to see you again.”

Charles was beaming. “Tracy, as lovely as ever. How is business?”

“Oh, Hello, Charles. Business is doing very well. But you have not been in to see me for a while. Does that mean you have been behaving?”

Charles laughed. “Yes, I go home on time every day now. Frances here has been a great help. You have to blame her for me behaving. She sends me off as soon as it gets dark!”

They all laughed.

“Tracy, this is Frances. She is our best weapon against your brother here. She is our most precious possession yet. Frances, this is Tracy, Adrian’s sister.”

“Hello.”

The women were eyeing each other. Adrian was watching Frances. She relaxed a little. He saw her unclench her hands and smile at Tracy. “Oh, so you are the woman who is driving my brother crazy? I am so pleased to meet you. I have heard a lot about you.”

Adrian glared at his sister and she smile sweetly. “Please, you absolutely must join us. I insist!”

She spoke gaily, waving her hands.

“Ur, I don’t know. I was taking Frances out for a special lunch. I owe her one. She had sorted out a teenage problem for me. Danielle is now much better since Frances spoke to her.”

“Oh, how nice, all the more reason to join us. We will all celebrate!”

“Okay, as long as Frances does not mind. Frances, can you bear to sit with Adrian, after this morning?” Charles laughed.

“Yes, of course.”

Adrian pulled out a chair for her next to him. He waited for her to sit down and leaned on the chair just a fraction too long. Tracy was watching him and saw how her brother’s longing for this woman stood naked before her eyes. *Gosh, he has it bad. She is so beautiful and sexy that poor man has no chance.*

“So, Frances, tell me about yourself.”

“No Tracy. Frances is not going to be cross-examined by you. Let us talk about something else, okay?” Adrian chided his sister. *Of course, she is dying to know everything about Frances.* But he also knew his sister was not discreet and would say something to her that would be totally embarrassing. And she did not need that again today.

“Frances, are you alright now?” He looked at her so gently that Frances could have sworn he actually meant it.

“Yes, of course. Thank you for your help this morning. I think the problem is now solved. Thank you.”

She looked down at her hands as she spoke. Adrian wanted to shake her so she could look at him. *What is wrong with her? Damn! Tracy is right. We need to talk.*

Charles was smiling. Even though Adrian was the Opposition, they had always liked and respected each other. He had been pleased that Adrian had taken the responsibility to try and resolve the problem with Kevin. Frances was definitely a lot happier when he saw her after that meeting. *Good old Adrian. Still protecting the principle, no matter what.*

“Yes, thanks Adrian. Frances is completely off-limits from your boys. Kevin needs to know that right up front.”

Tracy saw the slight embarrassment that flickered over Frances’s face. *So, she still wants my brother. What is the problem?* She would definitely find out.

“Frances, I think you deserve a special gift. It sounds like Adrian and these men have not been taking good enough care of you. Come back to the shop with me and I will prepare some beautiful flowers for you. Adrian will pay. He should have sent you flowers immediately.”

“Oh, that is not necessary.”

“Of course it is. Tracy is right. I know from experience that flowers always soothe a woman’s soul. My wife would never forgive me anything if I did not give her flowers. Yes, Adrian, since your people caused Frances’s distress, you must pay. It is settled.”

Charles was smiling broadly. He liked the way Adrian cared so much about Frances. He spoke gently to her. *At least now the project can move along smoothly. Adrian clearly has a soft spot for my invaluable consultant.*

“Okay, I get the point. It is my entire fault that Frances was upset. I will pay! Pay! Pay!” He clutched his chest as if in pain. They all laughed and when it was time to leave, Tracy insisted that Frances come along with her and her brother to get her flowers. She parted with Charles, who was very pleased with this arrangement. *It would help a lot if those two got along. Things would be a lot easier.*

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#### Chapter 4

Frances jumped into Adrian’s car and slipped into the back seat before there was any debate. She watched as the siblings chatted along and suddenly, Tracy said, “so Frances, why do you reject my brother so?”

“What?”

“Tracy, please don’t start trouble. Leave Frances alone. She had a long, awful day so far. Anymore more accusations from my people and she will have every reason to believe that I am conspiring against her. Sorry Frances. My sister has a wonderful ability of being indiscreet. Forget it okay?”

Frances said nothing. She watched as Adrian glared at his sister, who seemed totally immune to his glare.

“Okay, I will mind my own business for today. But come tomorrow, well, that’s another story.”

“Tracy, if you don’t stop, I swear I will tell Terry about that pretty boy who keeps coming to visit you in the day. Then I will suggest his mother come and help you in the shop.”

“Okay, relax. My lips are sealed.”

Frances loved the flower shop. It was painted in bright yellow shades and filled with sweet scents and beautiful flowers in various jars, vases and containers. Adrian took her to the back, where the door opened into a large garden. There were rows of plants all over and Frances was surprised at the appearance of a full garden at the back of what seemed like a tiny shop. The phone was ringing and Tracy went to answer it.

“Frances?”

“Yes.”

Adrian was staring at her. “We have a lot to talk about, don’t you think?”

“No, yes. Oh Adrian, what difference does it make? The end result is the same.”

“Frances, it makes a difference that you and I talk about whatever is going on. I need to understand.” His voice was so quiet and defeated that Frances wanted to hold him.

“Oh Adrian, I don’t know if I can. I don’t know what to say.”

“Tonight we will talk properly, okay? We will work our way through whatever is going on. If at the end, you still don’t want to be with me, then that is fine. At least I won’t feel so used by you.”

“Used, Adrian, what do you mean? Don’t you think that is a bit rich coming from you? How dare you? What game is this now? Look, I don’t know what you want from me. I don’t know the rules of your games. Why can’t you just leave me alone? What do you want?”

Adrian looked so hurt and angry that he stepped towards her, his anger in sharp contrast to the gentle atmosphere of flowers and sweetness.

“I have had enough of this. Tonight, I am coming to your place at eight. You will sit quietly and tell me all these accusations and whatever the hell you think I have done. You will tell me Frances, what relationship you have with Kevin and why you know so much about him. You will tell me, if I have to get it out of you. Is that understood?”

She was looking at him, afraid and confused. “Adrian, what do you want from me?” She said it so softly, he was not sure he heard her. Everything was so strange, that he could not bear to be here, in this beautiful garden, with her standing there, accusing one moment,

then afraid of him the next. He looked at her eyes, their shine reflected against a lamp overhead. Her head was tilted up towards him and he kissed her very gently on her lips.

“I want you, Frances. I want you.”

She stayed there, not moving. “Do you have any objection to that?”

“Oops!” Tracy had come in. “Not good timing! Sorry, bro!” and made her way out of the garden.

Frances was blushing and wondered if his sister had heard him. Adrian smiled.

“This is no good. Tonight, see you at eight. Now, please find the flowers you want so I can take you back to your office.”

She moved away from him, looking blindly at all the flowers. She did not want to buy flowers. She only wanted Adrian to really kiss her. She wanted the butterflies to stop fluttering in her tummy and her arms to have the decency not to rush to him like magnets.

“Adrian, I don’t want flowers. I want to run away. It has been a long, difficult day. I need to go away.”

“There you go. I think the wild irises with a dash of water lilies are just for you. These are called peace lilies, so I think that is what you need. Okay, Tracy will arrange them for you and I will bring them later. Agreed?”

She just nodded. They walked back into the shop in silence. Tracy was sitting at the counter, her long legs dangling towards the shiny floor.

“Okay, you two, have you decided what you want?” She was smiling innocently at her brother.

“Yes, can you do some wild irises with a few peace lilies? I will pick them from you later. Now we must get back to work.”

“Okay, fetch them after five. I will wait for you. Frances, you have made an excellent choice.”

“Thanks, but Adrian decided, not me. Thank you so much for the gesture, though. Things have been a little difficult, so some flowers are exactly what I need. I hope we meet again soon.”

“Oh I am sure we will. Adrian, before you go, can you load that awful, ostentatious arrangement into car please? I can send it over to Mr. Henry’s office later when Terry finally decides to grace me with his presence.”

“Sure, sis, oh, it is rather much, isn’t it?”

“Hmmm, but the customer is always right, if not always tasteful.”

When Adrian left, Tracy looked straight at Frances. “Well, I hope you and my brother can work things out. I think I like you.”

“That is very kind, but things are not as simple as it seemed out there. There are ...well, things that I don’t think we can resolve. I just don’t know what will happen.”

“It will work out, I know. Adrian is not often so affected by people. This is rare for him, so I know that you can work out the problems.”

Adrian was walking back in, so Frances did not reply.

“Okay, Madame, can we go now?”

“Yes, of course. Tracy, thank you once again for everything. Bye.”

“Bye you too and try to behave, okay, Adrian?”

“Bye sis, stop telling me what to do or I will get hold of Terry. I will see you at five.”

When they got to the car, Adrian looked at Frances. “Are you feeling okay? Why don’t you take the afternoon off to relax?”

“I can’t take time off or relax. There is quite a lot going on at the moment. So I am afraid, work it has to be.”

“Fine, but tonight we will try to relax, okay?”

“Okay, but I doubt that very much.”

He took her to her office and when she was about to leave the car, Adrian said suddenly, “tonight we will work through all this and it will be alright.”

She left, feeling very unsure of herself. Was Adrian simply trying to find out what she knew? Was he genuinely interested in the facts? Did he really not know what was going on? She could not decide, but driving home later that evening, she decided that it was better to tread cautiously on this issue with him. There was no point in revealing all, when

she was not sure where he stood. After all, Kevin worked for him and must receive his instructions from him.

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Adrian arrived a few minutes before eight that evening. He was wearing a casual pants and a t-shirt and he looked so deliciously fresh and relaxed that Frances felt her hormones singing in joy. *Shut up*, she thought. He held a large bouquet of flowers in his hands, as if it was uncomfortable for him.

“Oh Adrian, they are so beautiful!”

She took them from him, trying to decide where to put them. “Put them there. They will look fine there.”

He pointed to her fireplace. “Okay, boss, as you wish.”

He smiled and thought how he wanted to hear her say that in another context. She looked very radiant today, despite the hard day she had had. She was wearing loose black pants and a short shirt and she looked delightful as she walked around barefoot. He watched her place her flowers and realized why he loved this woman. He loved the total contrasts in her personality. One moment she was the strong businesswoman in the boardroom and the next moment she was the soft gentle soul wondering around with no shoes thinking about pretty flowers. He loved her and at that moment the realization hit him in the chest. She was oblivious to him as she moved the flowers back and forth. He moved behind and held her.

“They are fine there, okay?”

“Okay,” she leaned back into him unquestioningly.

“Thank you, they are beautiful.”

He was rubbing her tummy now and she placed her hand over his as it moved. “Now, I wonder, will it be my pleasure?”

Frances turned to face him and her indecent arms wrapped themselves around his neck. She kissed him and before long, their passion had overtaken their intentions of serious talk and clarification of issues.

Later, Adrian was staring into her eyes. “Frances, I have really missed you.”

“Yes, me too. Oh Adrian, hold me more.”

“With pleasure, my dear, anything else you desire?”

She laughed, “well, if you are offering....”

They eventually fell off to sleep and it was six o’ clock in the morning when they woke up to the phone ringing.

“Hello?”

“Wake up! It is payback time!”

“Jamie, sweetie, how are thou?”

“Not too good. My lady and I have a huge fight. She called me a racist, can you believe that? Just because I didn’t want to go to a jazz club last night. I was really tired and I hate the smoky feel of it. Anyway, she said I was a cultural supremacist and all things not so nice.”

“Oh Jamie, what did you say?”

“Nothing, I said if you feel that way, then it is fine. I was furious with her. How dare she say that to me? She should know me better. I will never forgive her.”

“Jamie, calm down. I can’t talk right now. Can we meet for lunch?”

“Oh, you have company. I see. So he is back?”

“Yes and no. What time?”

“12h30 the usual place.”

“Okay, see you there.”

She hung up the phone and realized that Adrian was glaring at her. *Now what?*

“Been busy, have you?”

“Well yes, sort of.”

“Sort of! Is that why you would not see me anymore? Because Jamie needs you more? Why did you just not say so Frances?”

Adrian had moved out of the bed and was hunting for his clothes. He stomped around furiously.

“Adrian, don’t be silly! Jamie is my cousin and dear friend. I know you have met him. He told me. Now you calm down. Gosh these men! Flying off the handle so early in the morning!”

Adrian was standing in the doorway, his pants already on, but he could not find his shirt.

“What are you saying? Where did I meet anyone called Jamie?”

“Jamie is Jeremy Daryn. He said you went to his office, looking for me. We all call him Jamie, on his instructions. He is my cousin!”

“Okay, okay, sorry.”

Adrian stood quietly in the doorway, his large figure looming. He was watching her, lying there on the bed. His mind was racing now. Was there another man? Is that why she had refused to see him? He had never contemplated the possibility. His felt his heart curl up slightly and thought how obscene the suggestion was. The image of any man touching her, holding her or making love to her made his heart stop beating for a second. He could not bear it and watching her, sitting upright in the bed, looking at him in horror and fear, he dismissed the thought. But the nagging sensation of jealousy crept slowly through his heart like a slime spilling, unconstrained.

“Frances, is there another man?”

She looked so confused and hurt that he knew it was true and the slimy jealousy evaporated.

“No, don’t be silly Adrian. Come back to bed.”

Her pleading voice beckoned to him and he felt his lust growing again. But he knew that he needed more from her. He needed to talk to her. He tried to stifle the growing hunger for her welcoming body, its nakedness drawing him to her. He looked away. *I need to think*. He left the room to find his shirt.

Frances was now totally confused. Did he really not know about the bugging of her telephone? He seemed to be really concerned about another man. If he was bugging her phone, he would surely know that there was no other man? But maybe, when she spoke to Jamie, he thought she was talking about someone else, not him. Maybe, that is why he thought there was another man. *What does all this mean?* She had tried to get him back

into bed, so she could try and talk about it. He was always calmer in bed. She did not want to talk while he stood at the door, standing so tall and confident. He had looked so annoyed with her for inviting him to bed that she felt hurt and rejected. Was that because it was a game to him?

Frances did not know what to think. She was now fully awake. She might as well get out of bed and start the day. She went into the kitchen to find Adrian making coffee. He did not look at her and carefully avoided her eyes.

“Coffee will be ready in a moment. Where is my shirt?”

“Hmm, I think it’s in the bed somewhere. I will get it for you.”

She dashed out of the kitchen. She knew that he was getting ready for a confrontation with her. She knew the way he avoided her eyes and the way his shoulders were upright that he had every intention of having a fight. She had seen it too often not to notice the signs. She found his shirt and decided that she had better get him before he started with her.

“Adrian, I really love the flowers. Please thank Tracy for me. She is very talented.”

“Yes.”

“The coffee is divine, as usual.”

“Is this the way we are going to do this? You will flatter me politely, in the hope that I will crumble as my ego rises? That I will be satisfied?”

“Adrian, please. You are in such a confrontational mood.”

“Wouldn’t you be, if I walked out on you, then seduced you and pretended everything was normal again? Wouldn’t you feel insulted?”

“Yes, I would I guess. I just.... well, we did not have an opportunity to talk last night.”

She was blushing slightly now. “But you got up this morning, ready for a fight. What do you want to me say or do?”

“I want you to stop playing games. I want to tell me what is going on, why you run away from me, when you clearly don’t want to. Tell me, Frances, why did you leave me?”

Frances watched him as he spoke. She realized that he was really hurt, that he was not playing any games this time. She knew then, with some certainty, that Adrian had not been involved in the phone bugging.

“Okay, I needed some space away from you. It was getting really emotional for me and I needed to get away from you. Adrian, let’s be fair here. What is the point? What will happen when someone finds out? I panicked, because something happened that made me realize that we are not from the same side. At the end of the day, if anything went wrong, you and I are political enemies. I just...”

“What happened?”

“That is exactly the point. It is a Party matter and I could not talk to you about it. That is the problem.”

Adrian was glaring at her now. He was starting to get angry, at her and their situation. “So you are telling me that you do not trust me?”

“Why should I? Tell me Adrian, what objective facts support me trusting you?”

“You want objective facts? Okay, woman, when you lie in arms, crying in ecstasy, when you moan in pleasure and comfort, you are thinking that you are sleeping with the enemy? Is that the kind of objective facts you are looking for?”

“No, you know what I mean. I don’t really know you and you don’t really know me. When something comes up, well, you have no reason to trust me either.”

So, do you always make passionate love to men you don’t know or trust?”

“Adrian, please, this is why I did not want to talk now. You are getting angry and it is not helping.”

“Oh, is that why you wanted me back in the bed, when I would be more vulnerable? That is an old trick.”

“Adrian, please, calm down. I am sorry that you seeing things this way. That is not what I was trying to say.”

“So, tell me, what are you trying to say?”

“Well, you and I, despite how we might feel, come from opposing forces. As a result, our being together places both of us at great political risk. That is the reason I ran away. I don’t know what I hoped would happen. My immediate thought was to try and escape.”

“Why did you not simply discuss it with me Frances? Because you don’t trust me?”

“How could I? Even now, there are things we cannot discuss.”

“Frances, you don’t trust me?”

Adrian was standing now and he shouted the words at her. She felt his pain and disbelief. He put on this shirt and left.

Frances wanted to cry. She felt trapped between her cautious political being and her emotional being. Adrian was right. She did not trust him. But could she dare discuss his loyal Kevin with him? Could she dare place herself at risk, when there was a small possibility that he knew about it? Could she dare not trust him, the man who made her feel whole? Could she dare do anything right now? How could she guarantee that he was not involved? Even if he wasn’t, how did it help? Kevin had probably been frightened off and would not do it again. It was hopeless. She would never be able to prove it. And Adrian would just put it down to the previous conflict with Kevin.

Frances spent the whole day thinking about what to do. She phoned Adrian at work, but his secretary said he was not available the whole day. She left a message on his cell phone.

“Adrian, please call me so we can talk. I am sorry things sounded the way they did.”

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Adrian did not call her back and she would have been surprised if he had. He was a stubborn man and she knew he had been hurt by her. He was also unforgiving and she knew that it was pointless to try and retract her comments. But she also knew that she was right. Adrian should know better. There were enemies, no matter what happened in the bedroom. They never discussed politics or even people in politics. He never discussed his work or colleagues with her. Somewhere, within him, he also did not trust her. There was no way he could deny that. She hoped he would come to his senses about it and they could talk. But she also hoped that he would continue to reject her and that would be end of it. No good would come from their relationship.

Meeting Jamie for lunch was a great relief. He poured a long and sorry tale about Monique, his lover. He really loved her, she could tell, but he was not coping well with the way she was. She was beautiful woman with large breasts and short black hair. She spoke in a forthright, clear voice and did not hesitate to express her feelings at all. Frances had met her twice and she knew that Monique was a good match for Jamie. He was just as

forthright and they had argued a lot when she met them together. They were clearly in love, but also had the same hang-ups. Both of them felt a little insecure about their racial identities and Jamie, despite what he said, was not sure how to deal with the fact that she was black. He had never mentioned this little detail to Frances before she met Monique. He had not known how to tell her, without attaching some significance to her race. Monique also, had been defensive when Frances met her. She had boldly said, “so, you are surprised I am black?”

Frances had made some nonsensical reply, relieved when the matter was not pursued.

“Jamie, do you think there is an element of truth in what Monique is saying, that you like that she is black, but don’t want to deal with it?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, you never told me she was black. It seemed an obvious thing to tell me.”

“Why, Frances, I have never told you that my other girlfriends were white.”

“Well, yes, that is true. But that is the ‘default position’, isn’t it? They are the women you are likely to meet, socialize with and therefore date. Monique is not that and I just thought you should have told me.”

“Okay, fair enough. She is not the ‘default position’ as you so coldly put it. But I guess I didn’t know what to say.”

“Because you were afraid that I might not approve?”

Jamie was quiet for a while. “Yes, I suppose so. There is spot of fear in my brain that I will have to defend her. Not against you, I know you know better than that, but against the world. So, I guess I just pretend it is not an issue. I know. I see what you mean. By not talking about it, I am giving her the impression that I am not happy with it?”

“Yes. And everybody else too. I think you should be upfront about it. Also, I think you should have gone to the jazz club, because by refusing, you are telling her that you reject the things that are important to her. That is not a race issue, just a relationship one. You have to endorse the things she wants, as she endorses your opera and other things.”

“Yes, I was wrong about that. But she was wrong to assume that it was a racist thing.”

“Yes, but Jamie, she is as defensive as you are. She has the same fears and the same responses to it. I think you should talk openly about it. I really think it would help.”

“I don’t know. I am pretty pissed off right now, at me and at her. Let her apologize.”

“Don’t be such an oaf! You refused to go with her, when you had promised you would go. You created the environment for her racial concerns. I am afraid, my dear that you have to make the first move.”

“Oh.... why did I ask for your advice? I knew you would say this. Damn, I hate it when I am wrong. She will never let me forget it.”

“Jamie, do something nice. Send her flowers with a cute note. Say something about being black.”

“What? Are you mad?”

“Yes, I am. She will respond if she thinks you accept that she is black. I know someone who makes beautiful arrangements in Connor Street. It is also Heavenly Senses. Her name is Tracy. Pop over there and she will do something unusual for you. I guarantee you will be impressed.”

“Okay, Connor Street, Heavenly Senses. Do you know her?”

“Yes, Well I have met her. She is the sister of the Him. She is brilliant.”

“Hmm. Meeting the family already?”

“No, it was an accident. Anyway, see her and you won’t be sorry.”

“Okay, I will do that now. Thanks for the listen, sis. I will phone you and tell you how it went.”

“Okay, but not at six in the morning!”

She laughed as he left. She hoped he would work things out with Monique. They were so good together that she hoped nothing as silly as race would stand between them.

She went back her office and was disappointed that Adrian did not phone her. She checked her cell phone again and there were no messages from him. *Shit, this is going to be tough. Maybe he is busy or in some meeting.*

But three days later, she had not heard from him. *Okay, she thought, I will just wait until I see him on Monday at the meeting.* But, by Saturday afternoon, she could bear it no longer. She phoned him and he answered almost immediately.

“Hi Adrian, how are you?”

“Fine.”

“Can you talk?”

“Yes, but I don’t want to, okay?”

Frances was devastated by his response. “Okay, fine, bye.”

Adrian felt at a loss. He had been pleased to hear her voice, but his anger had quickly taken over again. Despite all his sister’s advice that he was being irrational and unfair, he could not overcome the awful pain of knowing that the woman who made love to him so beautifully also did not trust him. He felt little saddened by the hurt in her voice, but also pleased. She deserved that. But his disappointment that she had not been persistent irritated him the most.

He wanted her to beg him, to plead to him and to give him back his sense of power and confidence. She had completely crushed him when she spoke to him that morning. In some ways, that hurt a lot more than when she had just disappeared. He had been worried about her then, wondering if something had happened to her. He had been so relieved that she was fine that his anger and hurt had been overshadowed by his joy of knowing she was fine. But that morning, her cold, rational account of their lives had blown him away. He had always assumed that she felt as strongly for him as he had for her. His ego had been severed in half as he listened to her, her mistrust a cool explanation of what she felt him. He would have felt better, on retrospect, if she had said there was another man. The more he played back in the conversation in his head, the angrier he grew. He had not been at his best this week and eventually, by Friday, everyone had been avoiding him. He was relieved, because he did not really want to talk to anyone except Frances. He wanted her to come to him and he wanted her to desperately show some emotion when she spoke about him. He wanted her to go down on her knees, begging for his forgiveness. But, he knew he was not going to get that. She had quickly agreed when he said he did not want to talk.

Tracy had said she was stating the reality of their situation. *Well, she is wrong.* The reality of their situation was that he had finally met a woman who made his blood rush through his heart and made his soul with joy. *That is the reality. The other stuff is simply a question of circumstance, nothing more.*

He wished she could talk to him. He wanted to know what had happened to make her so afraid and even angry with him. He remembered how she had made love (or rather lust) to him that last time. She had refused to talk. He realized now that she had been angry with him. What had he done? He left his house and drove to the beach. He needed to clear his head and swim so hard that his body would forget its aching for her.

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## Chapter 5

Frances eventually felt a little calmer. *Okay, Adrian is really angry and hurt.* Maybe she needed to swallow her pride and phone him again. Maybe she could try and reason with him. She dialed his number, but his phone just rang. She tried again, but he clearly would not answer each time he saw her number. *Damn!* There was not much else to do. Anyway, what else could she say? What would she say if he asked those questions again? She would have to say the same things. She had decided that she would never discuss the issue of Kevin with him. So, what was the point of phoning him? He would get angrier and things could get ugly. Since they were working together, it was best to leave things alone. She went off on her bike, trying to distract herself from the emptiness of not having Adrian tease her, touch her and make her laugh.

When Adrian got back to his car, he was exhausted. He checked his cell phone and saw that she had tried to call him. He was so pleased that he almost called her back. *No*, he thought, *she must try again.* But he felt less tense about her now, knowing that she had tried to get hold of him again. He went home and slept, feeling a lot better than he had in the week.

Frances, however, did not sleep that well. She felt rejected by him and incapable of finding a way to deal with the problem. She wanted Adrian and she would have been thrilled if she could trust him. But she knew that her work could be jeopardized if she made the mistake of trusting the wrong man, just out of lust. But, how, she thought, could Adrian be a wrong man when he touched her soul so much? How could he be wrong for her? None of it made sense.

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Jamie called her in the morning, inviting her to have lunch with him and Monique.

“Sweetie, thank you so much for the help. You were right. The flowers were wonderful and she just melted in my arms. We talked and talked and I think we will be fine. Now, will you come for lunch?”

“Oh Jamie, I am so pleased. I was worried when you didn’t call. I was going to call you tonight to see how things were. I called yesterday, but your voicemail was on. Anyway, yes, lunch would be great. What shall I bring?”

“Nothing but yourself and maybe the hunk if he is around. The last time I called, he was in your bed. Where is he now, Frances?”

“I am afraid completely out of the picture. We had a terrible fight and well, I don’t think he plans on forgiving me in this lifetime. He thinks it is all my fault. Well, back to the drawing board.”

“Hmmm, you said that the last time. I think you should take your own advice. Talk things through with him.”

“He can be very unreasonable. He becomes argumentative and difficult and I become defensive and before you know it, one of us is walking out the door. Anyway, I will tell you all about it later.”

“Okay, Tracy is also joining us, by the way. She is delightful. We just started chatting, and I stayed for tea in her garden. So I invited her to join us. She is bringing her boyfriend.”

“Oh really, that is interesting. Well, see you later, bye.”

“Bye.”

Frances was a little nervous about having to see Tracy, but she need not have been. Tracy was open and friendly to her and the two women were whisked off by Monique into the garden for girl talk. They spoke about lots of things, giggling furiously, as Monique gave them graphic descriptions of Jamie’s attempt to seduce her after they fought. She made them laugh with her funny stories about men and Frances relaxed, a little too soon.

“Anyway, Jamie says things are off again with your mystery man. Now what?”

“Oh I don’t know. He won’t even speak to me now, so it is definitely over.”

“Really, Frances?” Tracy looked at her boldly.

“Yes, really, we had a fight and we completely misunderstood each other. He is furious with me now and refuses to talk to me. I suppose it is a good thing, because it would have only led us to pain. So that’s that.”

“But Frances it can’t be that bad. I mean, last week, Jamie said he tried to talk to you, but he was there. I still don’t see why he is such a big mystery. I mean, how bad can it be? Look at Jamie and me. We are hardly the traditional couple are we? Who is he is Frances? Is he married?”

“No! Well, not as far I know. No. I just, please, I can’t talk about it. It’s over and there is no need to drag up the past.”

Tracy was smiling.

“Well, Monique, I happen to know the mystery man. That is how Frances and I met. He was trying to send her flowers. I also know that they have never openly talked about the problem they have. He can be stubborn, but he is not entirely unreasonable. His problem is that he is a control freak. If he is upset, then he simply won’t budge until you, Frances, say you are sorry. He will never give in until then. I know there have been times when we have not spoken for weeks! Until I go to him, cap in hand and apologize. Then he is wonderful.”

“Oh Tracy, I tried that. It seemed to make him angrier. Now he is simply furious with me. The trouble, of course, is that he thinks I am just being manipulative. He is angry because I don’t fully trust him, but in the same breath he accuses me of playing games! He will never accept that he does not trust me. We go round and round in circles. Now, he won’t even return my calls.”

“That doesn’t sound like him. I will speak to him.”

“No, No, No! Please, Tracy, leave it alone.”

“So you know him, Tracy. Jamie said he is a hunk. Is that true?”

“Oh yes, I am sure Frances will agree to that.”

“No, I have no comment on that one. Please, tell me about Terry there. He seems to completely adore you.”

“Spoken like a true politician. Yes, Terry does adore me most of the time, when his mother is not around. His mother gets him first. It is a huge issue for us. But otherwise, he is a kind, gentle, man who always allows me to have my way with him.”

They were shrieking with laughter when Jamie joined them.

“Oh, this is the kind of conversation men would pay millions for! Now, have we been totally indiscreet ladies?”

“Of course, Jamie, of course,” Monique said and laughed.

“Oh well, I suppose I should hide my head in shame! I came to call you back inside.”

The lunch was pleasant and Frances was the first to leave. She needed to get some preparation done for tomorrow’s meeting with Adrian and his team. With all the issues now, she was not going in there unprepared. Adrian or Kevin would eat her up alive.

When she was leaving, Tracy came to her and hugged her. She whispered to Frances. “Let him think he is the boss and he will do whatever you want.”

When Tracy and Terry left, Terry was dying to know who Frances really was. “What do you mean?”

“Everyone treats her like she is an invalid. Fussing over her like that. Even you were very gentle with her. Who is she, Tracy?”

“Adrian’s woman”

“What, the one who drives him so crazy? The one who ran off without a word? Good God! I must say, she is beautiful. But I think you are wrong about one thing. She is not as weak as you think. She is a very strong woman. Adrian must have under-estimated her.”

“Yes, that is definitely true. That is why he goes so crazy when he doesn’t have his way with her. She and Adrian just had a big fight last week and now he refuses to speak to her. Hearing her version today, I must say he is the one who should be apologizing. She belongs to the Opposition.”

“Holy cow! That is pretty bad business for both of them. Are they crazy? If someone saw them together, there would be hell to pay.”

“That is exactly part of the problem. But they are working on a project together and everyone hopes they will get along well, because they are the two strong, stubborn ones from each side. The trouble is nobody knows just how well they have gotten along in the bedroom! Adrian says the sex is so good it is spiritual. Can you believe it?”

“No, quite frankly, the idea of Adrian so hung up on a woman is impossible to envisage. So what is going to happen now?”

“I don’t know. They are both two of a kind, I’m afraid. But Adrian is gone completely crazy this time. I think I will speak to him.”

“Tracy, don’t interfere. Leave them to work out their own problems. You know how you hate it when people interfere in our business? Well, I am sure they feel the same. Leave it alone.”

“Okay,” she said quietly.

But Terry knew that she was just saying that to appease him. He smiled as he thought that his beautiful Tracy had no idea just how much she was like his mother. This is exactly how she reacted to situations like this. If he told her this, she would go into a total frenzy and it would take weeks before she forgave him. He knew that as soon as he got into the shower, she would phone Adrian and try to get him to do as she wanted. He did not mind, because he had long gotten over the fact that his future wife had some of the tendencies of his mother. On one level, it almost comforted him, because at least he knew what he was in for.

When they got home, he feigned tiredness, because he knew she would impatiently wait for him to go away. He turned the shower on and stepped out of the shower. As expected, she was on the phone downstairs, talking to Adrian. He smiled and went back into the shower.

Adrian sounded weary when Tracy spoke to him.

“Well, dear bro, guess who I had lunch with today?”

“Well, dear sis, I am not in the mood for guessing. Anyway, I am busy, so get to the point.”

“Ouch! Not in a good mood. Anyway, it was Frances. We went to Jamie’s house and she was there. So, we bonded. She is a great woman, isn’t she?”

“Hmmm, if you say so. Now, what can I do for you?”

“Aren’t you interested in what she had to say about you?”

Adrian hesitated for a moment. He wanted to know but he suspected that it would not be good. “Not really, she hates my guts and will never see me again?”

“No,” Tracy was laughing.

“Firstly, she thinks you are a hunk, but she is terribly hurt that you won’t answer the phone when she calls. She really looks bad, Adrian. She looks tired and defeated. Why won’t you take her calls?”

“None of your business, sis. Anyway, I forgot my cell phone when I went to the beach. She phoned then. If she is looking defeated, that is all in your mind. She will never be defeated, sis. She has a calm, unattached way of dealing with me. I hate it and I will never forgive her for not trusting me. So, stay out of it.”

“Well, Mr. Bad-Temper. Have you ever trusted her? When did you pour your heart out to her?”

“What, she is now using you to get to me? I am going to kill her. She is always playing games!”

Tracy laughed.

“That is exactly my point. She did nothing of the sort! In fact, she made me swear I would not talk to you about it. She did not want to discuss it in my presence, but she was put in a corner by me and Monique and had no choice. She said very little and used words like ‘no comment’ when we asked her questions. But, the point, bro, is that you don’t trust her, but you are angry with her for the same reason. You assume that she is ‘playing games’. I have no doubt you would have said that to her too! Do you have double standards, then? She must trust you, but you don’t have to trust her? Is that it?”

“Tracy, leave it alone. Her business is to convince people to do whatever she wants. Don’t let her play you.”

“And your business bro? Is that not what you do, politician dear? Hmm, I see the problem. You want double standards. Well, I never thought you were the type, but then, you never really know someone, do you?”

“Tracy, stop this game. I am busy. When she feels ready to deal with me properly, we will talk. Before then, there is nothing to discuss. Leave it alone. I will deal with her my way. Also, since when are you and Jamie such good buddies?”

“Well, he came in to get some flowers for Monique because they had been fighting. So we started chatting. It was great. We just clicked.”

“Did she send Jamie to you?”

“Yes, but she really liked the flowers. Jamie walked in and said: ‘A good friend tells me you do magical things with flowers. I have a problem, can you help me?’ Well then we talked. I made the flowers and that was that. Monique loved them and also said I was great. Adrian, can you hear yourself? You think she sent Jamie to me to get you? So you don’t trust her? I must tell you, she did not know I would be there. I asked Jamie to invite her. He was reluctant, saying she was feeling miserable. He eventually gave in when I persisted. It was me, dear bro, who wanted to see her again. Now, any other suspicious questions?”

“No, but I admit that you have a point. I will consider your comments in my deliberations, okay?”

Tracy laughed. “Okay, but you sound as evasive as Frances that I am beginning to believe that you two deserve each other! I have to go now. Terry is coming out of the shower and had given me strict instructions not to interfere. He thinks she is beautiful, by the way. Bye.”

Adrian laughed. *Poor Terry. If only he knew that telling her not to interfere was like begging her to get on the phone!*

“Okay, good night dear sis. Thanks for caring so much.”

When he got off the phone, Adrian forgot about the tons of paper lying on his desk. He realized, as Tracy had carefully anticipated, that he had not been entirely fair to Frances. He had not trusted her as much, if not more, than she mistrusted him. Their circumstances were such that, it would have taken a fool to trust the Opposition like that. She was no

fool. Also, he realized that he had repeatedly accused of playing games, or other things, but she had not reacted as childishly as he did. She had always tried to explain or reason with him. He had never tried to reason with her. She had been very honest with him when she had admitted that there were things she could not discuss. Of course he had not discussed many things with her too. She was right and it agitated him more. *Damn, she always gets the better of me!* When would she lose her cool and do something silly because she wanted him? Right now he wanted to phone her, but he knew it would further make him feel out of control. She had to be the one who came to him. At least then, he would feel like he had some power in the relationship. He eventually went back to his pile of papers to avoid going to the phone or driving to her apartment.

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## Chapter 6

The meeting was pleasant and civilized. After the outburst from Kevin last week, everything had changed. Everyone made a greater effort to speak to their counterparts in the opposition and there were many jokes shared in the meeting. *Frances is much quieter today*, Adrian thought. *Maybe she really does feel defeated. Her eyes look tired like she hasn't slept in days and her body looks like it could do with a massage. She looks so vulnerable today.* He desperately wanted to go to her right then in the meeting and hold her.

Charles was also worried about Frances. *She is working too hard these days.* He was partly to blame for that. She was quick and solved problems efficiently and he liked the way she always tried to be fair and honest with the other side. *But maybe I am pushing her too hard. Maybe she needs a break.*

“Okay, are we all in agreement? Now, I have another matter to discuss. I would like us to postpone next week’s meeting.”

“I don’t think it would be too serious.” Kevin said. “But if we start postponing now, we might lose the momentum of the thing. So far, we are doing brilliantly.”

“Yes, I know. It is just that Frances and I need a break. Things have been hectic and we would like to take a few days off. If possible, we can meet on Wednesday.”

Adrian was watching her. She had been very surprised by this announcement, but had quickly disguised it with her smile. He knew her well now and knew how to read her expressions. She was definitely wondering what Charles was up to. She had said things had happened that she could not discuss. *Could this have something to do with it?*

“Fine, Wednesday is fine.” Adrian spoke before Kevin thought of something clever to say. Adrian did not want Frances to be hurt, no matter how angry he was with her. They had things to sort out in their Party and he wanted her back here, in good health soon. Maybe he had been too harsh with her. He realized just how selfish he had been. He had never really considered the added pressure he was putting on her. He had arrogantly assumed that it was all about him.

She smiled at Adrian when she got up to leave and quietly said, “thank you.”

His heart was thudding fiercely against his chest. He liked the way she smiled. Her gratitude meant that it was important. *What is so terrible, my sweet, that you cannot tell me? I want to help you, protect you,* he thought as he smiled back.

“It’s my pleasure. After how we have shamefully treated you, it is the least we can do.”

Charles joined them now. “Thank you, my boy. We really appreciate it.” He walked off with his arm around Adrian, guiding him away from Frances.

“Don’t look so suspicious. There is nothing untoward about this. It came to me while we were in the meeting, actually and I haven’t discussed it with Frances. I just don’t like seeing her look so tired. Things have been hectic and I want to send her off somewhere for a long weekend. She needs a break. I have been depending on her too much lately and I did not notice how strained she was until I saw her now. Now, I have to convince her to go away for a few days. Wish me luck!”

“Yes, you are going to need it. Charles, you don’t have to tell me the details, but is everything alright?”

“Yes, of course. The usual stuff. But for Frances, things have been a little difficult in these last few weeks. She has had her phones checked and then she literally ran away that time, when you thought we were being difficult. Someone is putting undue pressure on her and we can’t find out whom. She just smiles when I try to get it out of her.”

“Her phones? Why?”

“Well, she must have had good reason to believe that something was wrong. There was a bug, unfortunately, but we had it removed. Of course, she is saying nothing. But it seemed to have rattled her. She looked so hurt and betrayed that I think it is someone inside. She knows who it is, but won’t say. I am sure she has good reason. But we now have new devices in her office to prevent further ‘intruders’. I want her to go away, to take the pressure off her. She is like a daughter to me, you know. I can’t bear to see her so tense.”

“Yes, she is rather quiet today. I can’t believe some creep would bug her phone. She plays upfront and honest. She is not the person one is likely to do that to. I just don’t understand why she would protect the creep.”

“Knowing Frances, she has a plan. But whatever it is, it is eating her up inside. It must be someone she trusted a lot. I am waiting patiently, hoping she knows what she is doing.”

“Thanks Charles. At least I will know to go easy on her.”

“Yes, that would be good. She is a little afraid of you, so that would help.”

When he turned around, she had already left the building. *Oh gosh, she must be terrified.* Is that why she wouldn’t see him? She knew that someone was listening? He thought hard about it and realized that he had never phoned her in her office. He always left her messages on her cell phone. Who would do that to her? She had said she had panicked and run away. Who would create such fear for her? Adrian was getting worried now. His precious Frances had so much to deal with, and he was too busy being selfish to listen to her. *Where is she now?*

He went to his office and tried to call her. Her phone was off and he left a message to call him. He would simply have to wait now.

There was a knock on his door. Kevin came in looking confident and smiling broadly. “So Adrian, what do you think that was all about?”

“What, Kevin?”

“That little thing, ‘Frances and I need to go away...’?”

“I think they want a break. They are old friends. I don’t think there was a hidden agenda.”

“Well, I don’t know. Rumor has it that she is falling apart over some man. Apparently, he doesn’t want to see her and she is devastated. Do you think it’s Charles?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I have it on good authority that she has been having a secret affair with someone illicit. Now, he has dumped Ms. Ball-breaker.”

Adrian could feel his instincts rise within him. Kevin knew too much about Frances and her business. He must know who is bugging her phones and clearly the details.

“Kevin, really, tell me more.”

“Okay, well, my source tells me that she was seeing some guy, she fell in love with him, but he was just messing with her. He now has run a mile and she is well, not coping. I hear it is illicit, not kosher, not on the cards. It is top secret at this stage, Adrian, so don’t discuss it.”

“Who is the man?”

“That nobody knows. But she does spend a lot of time with Charles.”

“Not likely. He is like a father to her.”

“Yes, I suppose you are right. Anyway, he is apparently quite a gorgeous hunk and is well, great in the sack. So I guess that doesn’t sound like Charles.”

Adrian laughed. “No, that is not Charles at all. Who gives you this information?”

“Oh come on, Adrian. We have been through this before. I can’t tell you. I can’t tell her. It is my secret. My sources are so good. Anyway, why do you want to know?”

“I would like to meet this person. They know quite a lot about her. It might help me to deal with her. This is the kind of information that helps me.”

“No, I really can’t. All I promise to do is to fill you in on the information as I receive it.”

“Don’t you trust me, Kevin?”

“It is not a matter of trust. I really can’t reveal my source.”

“Okay, fair enough. Now, is there more?”

“Well, nothing major. She has a very good friend called Jamie. They apparently share all their secrets. He is dating a black woman and I hear she is exquisite. She also keeps good contact with her parents. I believe they simply adore her. Other than the mystery man, there does not appear to be much else. I am told she is highly intelligent and plays fairly between the parties when she negotiates. She seems to be loved by all, actually and is

constantly offered opportunities to get bigger, better work. But she remains forever faithful to dear Charles. That is why I thought he was the man. But, I guess he is not. Well, I am sure I will soon find out and I will let you know. I must go back to work.”

“Thanks Kevin, you have been a great help.”

Adrian sat at his desk, staring into space. Kevin definitely knew who was bugging her phone. He tried to think back to the day Kevin had attacked her. She had gone on and on about him revealing his sources. She had not even paid attention to anything else he said. So she knew that Kevin was involved. How? Why? His office did not work with her much. Why were his people relying on the Opposition for information? That was too stupid. Frances had told Kevin to be careful of his sources, that they would destroy him. Damn, if only he had been paying attention. What else had she said? He could not remember, because he was too busy wanting to hold her to listen carefully. That is why she was so distraught that day. *God, where is she?* He needed to talk to her.

He wondered why Kevin would trust the source so much. Was it because he also told the source stuff from his office? Was it because he was one of the young men that Kevin supposedly liked so much? Why was Kevin involved in all this? Why play that game? Nobody would authorize him to do that. It had been agreed a long time ago that such games were futile and destructive. He left his office and went to see his partner and trusted friend, Michael Grantham, the Minister of Environmental Affairs.

“Mike, we need to talk. Let’s get some fresh air. I have been in a meeting the whole morning and my brain needs air.”

“Sure, are you okay?”

“Yes, of course, just need some fresh air.”

They walked out into the garden at the back of their building.

“Mike, Kevin is involved in something that might cause some serious embarrassment to us. I need to know if you know anything about it.”

After he told Michael about it, they sat in silence for a while. “No, I don’t know about this. But if he is involved in spying on her, then we could be in trouble. She is completely untouchable. They adore her and she is like their diamond. If there is any hint that we are colluding in victimizing her in any way, it has to stop. You say Kevin started screaming in the meeting? Well, it sound to me that she set him up. She suspected him and that is the

only way to flush him out. Say something that affects him, because he will be forced to act. Yes, so, he went berserk, you say?"

Michael laughed. "That is an old trick. You force the person to admit something awful about themselves and force them to make a complete idiot of themselves. They can't say where they got it from, so they are trapped. That way, it hurts them more than you to listen in. Now, he never knows whether the information is true or not. She is a lot sharper than Kevin, because now she knows for a fact that he is involved. Does she think you are involved?"

"I don't think so. I mean, Kevin has not said anything about me. It had been about him. No, I don't think so."

"Good, because he works so closely with you, you need to stop it. Nobody would believe he did it without your knowledge. The whole project you love so dearly could collapse."

"How, Mike, how do I stop him? If I confront him, he will simply deny it. What can I do?"

"Hmm, let me think about it. I will come up with something."

Adrian went back to his office and tried to phone her again. Her phone was still off and he wondered what she was doing.

Frances had left the meeting too confused and tense to work. What was Charles on about? Why was Adrian so sweet and gentle to her? What was going on now? She was about to settle in when Charles came to her.

"Why did you run off like that?"

"Oh just a few things waiting for me here. Charles, now, what was going on in there? Why the postponement and the quiet chat with Adrian?"

"Oh my dear, so many questions!"

He was smiling at her, enjoying her anxiety. It was nice for her to be the anxious one. He was usually the one flying off with one hundred questions and she would smile and answer them for him.

"Okay, about Adrian. I just wanted to reassure him that we were not being naughty. He seemed okay with that. Now the postponement is for you. You look like hell and you will

have a long weekend. Come back in time for the meeting on Wednesday. You need a break. Before you start arguing with me, I absolutely insist. These last few weeks have been hell for you. I have given you all my problems, with little consideration of your problems. You need a break, Frances, from all these people and from me. Take time out, so you will come back feeling okay. Whatever is going on can't be that bad. Talk to me and we can work through it. You need a friend now and I am that. Please, Frances, let it out."

Frances was smiling. "So, you are saying that I get to spend a delicious weekend, no Monday morning rush, no Friday afternoon deadline? I will definitely not refuse. I really need some time out. Things are getting a bit hectic, but it is nothing serious. I just got a little upset and now I am fine. Just tired. If I need to talk, I will come to you, I promise, okay?"

"Okay, but now, when will you go away?"

"Well, I can't leave before Thursday. I am booked up solid till then. Thursday and Friday, I can send someone else to do the talking. Yes, I am quite looking forward to this."

"Where will you go, Frances?"

"I will visit my parents. They have been nagging me lately and I need some home ground to recuperate from this place. You can phone me there if there's a problem. Thanks Charles. You are a great friend. Now, can you leave me alone to work?"

Charles left her office, relieved that she wanted to get away for a while. But he also realized that her heart was heavily burdened with something. He noticed how she changed the topic quickly and how she looked away from him when he tried to discuss it. He knew she would talk, but he did not know when. He hoped a visit to her parents would make her feel more open when she got back. She would talk to her father and he would know what to say to her.

Frances phoned Tracy. "Hello, how are you?"

"Frances, oh, how wonderful. Now, what have you done to my brother? He phoned twice to see if I had seen or heard from you."

"Oh, my cell phone is off. I had a meeting and forgot to put it on again. Oh, I will call him back just now. Anyway, I need a favor. I am taking your advice. I am going to apologize

and do all that. I thought I would start off with some flowers. Gosh, with all our problems, you are going to be able to retire soon! Send him a small bunch of `man flowers`. Should I send them to work or home?”

“Hmm, I think work. That way everyone will wonder who is sending him flowers. Also, he works so late and he might only get them at midnight. Okay, I can do something small for him. What do you want the card to say?”

“Ur.... Dearest, dearest Adrian.”

Both of them laughed.

“You were right, my lord and master and I was soooo wrong. Can you ever forgive me? Your eternal Slave.”

Tracy was laughing so hard that she almost choked. “Oh, the man’s ego is going to soar through the roof. Will he know they are from you?”

“I hope he knows, otherwise he is going to pursue some woman for no reason she knows of!”

“Yes, he will know. Anyway, he will probably phone me immediately and demand the name.”

“Thanks, I will drop by later this afternoon to pay you. I need to do a few things and then I will pop over.”

“Okay, no problem at all. Stay and have some tea when you come. But, please, phone him. It seemed urgent. Bye for now.”

“Bye.”

Frances smiled as she turned to her desk. Adrian will not be amused that a woman sent him flowers to his office. But he had been so difficult, he deserved a little embarrassment. She tried to phone him, but his phone was off. She left a short message.

“Adrian, tried to call you back. Will try later.”

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Adrian was sitting impatiently in his third meeting today. The afternoon was quickly passing and he still had not spoken to Frances. He wondered where she had gone. He

wanted so desperately to hear her voice to assure himself that she was okay. He was bothered by the information he received today. Was she in danger? Was she doing work that was dangerous? What did Kevin have to do with it? He wondered why Kevin would even begin to engage in illicit activities. He had a good job, was very good at it and had a wonderful wife who supported him thoroughly. They had a background check and there was nothing to suggest that he had unacceptable connections or even connections in Frances' Party. In fact, they had made sure of that before they employed him. He had been a marketing strategist for conservation body and was squeaky-clean when he started working with Adrian. Adrian was frightened about how much he trusted the guy and wondered what information he had told him that had found its way back to Frances' people.

He wished the meeting would end, so he could get out of the building and clear his head. He needed to see Frances before he burst. *Is she alright?* He kept asking himself.

Kevin watched how agitated his boss was. Something was not entirely right here. He wondered whether he had revealed too much when he told Adrian about Frances. But he needed Adrian to trust him and depend on him. In his last job, nobody had taken him seriously and he had hated every single one of them. But Adrian was different. He spent a great deal of time with all his staff and knew everybody well. He had been good to Kevin in all those dark days when his wife Charmaine wanted to leave him. He had almost died of pain then, but Adrian had helped him through that. He was pleased at how interested Adrian was in that woman. He had done the right thing in bugging her. Her office bug was dead and that was a real pity. That was what he really wanted to know about. Her work and how she did it. Adrian needed to know his enemy well. The home device did not yield much information, except silly things about her pathetic love for some man who seemed not to care much for her. He never phoned her at home and seemed to pop in now and again. He must be married and the thought of her desperate for a married man made him smile. *Serves her right.* She was far too high-and-mighty for her own good. She had walked into her first meeting, looked dismissively at Adrian and acted like he was insignificant. That was totally unacceptable. But Kevin was also worried. Adrian wanted to know his sources. He could not hide that for too long. Adrian would want a name at some time and he could not think what he would do. Should he just tell Adrian how he knew? He looked at Adrian's impatient hand tapping on the table. *No, that would never*

*do*. Adrian believed in honest conduct and anyway, it was a criminal offence. Knowing Adrian, he would simply call the police. Charmaine would not even bat an eyelid before she left him for that. Soon, he would have to come up with a name.

Adrian marched into his office, desperate to find his cell phone. He looked around and found it in his draw. He ignored his secretary's knowing smile and listened to his messages. He went to his desk to sit down and saw the flowers placed carefully on the center. They were clearly Tracy's handy work. *What is she up to now?* He pulled out the card and read it. He laughed out loud and his secretary, desperate to know who sent him flowers, came in.

"Is everything alright, Adrian?"

"Yes, thank you, everything is just fine."

*That wench. She is interfering again.* He listened to his messages and was relieved to hear Frances' voice. *So, she is fine.* She sounded a little annoyed with him, but hell that's all they had been with each other lately. He did not want to call her back. He was tired of her games and her evasiveness. He would just go there tonight and talk to her. At least now he knew enough to deal with her.

He phoned Tracy. "That was very naughty of you. I think it is time for me to tell Terry's mother you need some help in the shop. 'Your eternal slave?' A bit much, don't you think?"

"Hello, bro. I am not sure I am with you. I received a request to send you 'man flowers' today. That was the message. What is naughty about that? It is called business in my world."

"Come on, Tracy, come on!"

"She just left a few moments ago. She came to pay and we had some tea. If you don't believe me, I will send you the receipt."

Adrian was silent for a while. He knew that Tracy was not lying. "Frances sent me these? To my office?"

"Yes, she said to make sure the note was sealed properly."

"She told you to send that message?"

“Yes, I had a good laugh. She seemed to think she needed to try a new strategy with you. You have not returned her calls, I believe. Adrian?”

“Yes?”

“Are you pleased?”

“Yes, I guess. I am also surprised. Did she say anything else?”

“We talked about her work mainly. But she did say that working with you was great and that you were so sweet to her today.”

“Hmmm, and?”

“And that... well, girl stuff.”

“Tracy.”

“Okay, I think she wants to talk about something. Adrian, she is very agitated and is looking quite bad. Something is happening and I don’t think she knows what to do.”

“She told you that?”

“No, but a woman knows.”

“What is going on?”

“I don’t know. But I know that she is worried, not only about her, but also about you. Adrian, she kept saying that she didn’t know what she is doing, because she might be jeopardizing you.”

“By being with me?”

“Yes. I think so. But she does not talk easily. I have to manipulate her to talk. Also, she is going away to her parents on Thursday. She will only be back on Tuesday night.”

“I see. Thanks sis. For once your interfering might just help me.”

“Oh good. Now please, do not do anything silly and do not let your ego get the better of you.”

Adrian sat back in his chair. He had no clue what to do next. She had finally done what he wanted all along, but he did not feel the sense of victory and power he imagined he would enjoy. He simply felt pleased that she had tried to make it up to him. But his mind was still largely pre-occupied with all the things he had heard today. What should he do?

He looked at the time and it was already five. He looked at the string of messages that needed his attention and mechanically dealt with everyone on his list. It was almost seven before he was through. He had not phoned Frances. He could not decide what to do. It had been a long day filled with so many issues that he could not see his way clear. He got into his car and decided to go home. He wanted time to be alone to ponder what he should with Frances. But as he was driving along, he did not realize that he had chosen her road and a few minutes later, he stopped at her house. *Well, perhaps I have decided after all.* He sat in his car, thinking what to say, what to do. Suddenly he got up and went to the door. He rang the bell and there was no answer. He saw her car there, so he assumed she was home. He rang it again and this time he heard her shouting. "I'm coming, I'm coming, you impatient coot! Hang on!"

*So she is expecting someone. Who?* He wondered about that for a moment and recognized the rising green slime of his jealousy and shoved it back down.

"Really, Jamie, you don't have to ... Adrian."

"Hello, Frances. How are you?"

"Ur... Fine, thank you. Please come in. Sorry about the shouting, but I thought you were Jamie. He was to arrive promptly at six-thirty, but did not. I ...ur, would you like a cup of tea?"

"No thank you. Frances, do you always wear a t-shirt when you expect guests?"

"Oh gosh, sorry, give me a minute, I will find my jeans. I was about to go into the shower and...."

"Don't, it is fine. I was just asking."

"No, no, I will be back in a moment."

Frances rushed out of the lounge. She was a little confused and frightened. Had she been wrong to send him the flowers? He did not seem amused. In fact, his eyes were dark and intense, as if he was ready to fight again. She grabbed her jeans and was putting them on when the doorbell rang again. *Shit, Jamie has really bad timing.* She listened as she heard them speak and then she heard them laugh. *Maybe I should keep Jamie for a while. Adrian might relax.*

"Jamie, hi. A little late, aren't we?"

“Hi Sorry about that. It’s a long story. But I see now why you wanted me out of here by seven. Hmmm, we haven’t been too honest now, have we?”

Adrian smiled at her embarrassment. How would she get out of that one?

“Jamie, this is Adrian. I gather you have met?”

“Yes, of course.”

Adrian was a little disappointed. He would have liked to see her sweat a little more. But she was skilled at dealing with crises, so he should not have been surprised that Jamie’s attempt to rattle her had failed.

“I see that I have come too late to be entertained, so I think I will grab the CDs you promised and leave. Sorry, my sweet, but you said nothing about a later appointment.”

“Don’t be silly. Sit down. Adrian, please sit down. Who wants tea, coffee or wine?”

“Wine for me,” Jamie said.

He was glad he was staying. He wanted to see these two together. He wanted to get a sense of things without Frances’ completely hopeless subjectivity. Adrian looked a little disappointed that he was staying, but Jamie did not care. This man had caused enough trouble in his little Frances’ heart that he deserved to be scrutinized. He watched as Adrian followed Frances to the kitchen. He was peeping at them, as silently, Adrian took the bottle of wine from her, went to a cupboard and pulled out a cork screw. *So he knows his way around better than me?*

“I think I will also have a glass. And you Frances, think you gonna need it?”

“Yes, please, in fact, I’ll have the rest of the bottle.”

She smiled at him. “Yes, maybe later, my eternal slave.”

She stared in horror at him and he laughed. “Come my dear, you have a guest. Can I have some glasses? Are we playing delay tactics again?”

“Oh yes, I think Jamie should spend the night here.”

“With the two of us?” He laughed again as Frances stared at him. *Shit, he is going to give me a hard time tonight.*

“Okay, you win. Game is up. Let us go and have some wine,” and left him in the kitchen.

All three of them sat quietly for a while and then Jamie started chatting. “I like Tracy and Terry. She is so talented. They are going away with us this weekend. We are going to spend some time on the beach. It will be great fun.”

“Terry agreed to this?” Adrian was surprised.

“Oh yes, he thought it was a wonderful idea. I think he feels that Tracy does not spend enough time with him, so he was very keen. Why?”

“No, he doesn’t really like going away. Well, there is a first for everything, I suppose.”

He was looking at Frances as he spoke. *What is he on about?*

“So, I believe you and Frances are working on a project together?”

“Yes and it has been a most interesting time for both of us, don’t you think, Frances?”

“Not really. Adrian here can be a complete bully. He won’t negotiate and makes all sorts of odd conditions. Then he goes into stubborn mode and we are all forced to do as he says.”

“Yes, I admit I am a bit of a control freak. I like to the idea that some people are my eternal slaves.”

“Really, even Frances?”

“Oh yes, especially Frances.” Adrian was laughing at her now.

“Jamie, don’t listen to him. He is just making fun of me. It’s a private joke.”

“Okay, I was getting a little worried there for a moment. I remember how aggressive you were when you were looking for Frances.”

“Yes, sorry about that. I was seriously pissed off with her.”

They talked for a bit and then Jamie got up to leave. He had to fetch Monique from her apartment and she hated him to be late. He was reluctant to leave, because he liked the way Adrian was handling Frances. He had a way of teasing her which was affectionate, but effective in getting her to behave. When he left, he hoped that this time, Frances would not phone to tell him that it was over. *Enough is enough. They must make it work or drop it*, he thought. Tomorrow he would phone her to discuss it.

“So Frances, are you alright?”

“Yes, Adrian. I am fine. Just a little tired. You?”

“Not fine at all. Frances, we need to talk. But I mean really talk. No sex, no seduction, please. We need to talk openly and honestly, okay?”

“Okay, if.... yes. Adrian, what do you want to know?”

He looked at her for a while. Would she tell him?

“Frances, why does Kevin know so much about you?”

Frances was shocked by the question. She had hoped he would talk about them, the usual fight, about trust or power. She had not anticipated this.

She held her breath for a while and breathed slowly. She closed her eyes. This was the moment when her life would begin beautifully in love or end tragically in betrayal.

Should she choose the safe and cautious route she knew or risk loving him enough to trust him?

“Oh Adrian, that is exactly the problem. That is why we can never be together! Don’t you understand? Why don’t you understand! I want out! I want out of this project! I want to be left alone. I want my life back! God, Adrian, we just can’t do this. Don’t you understand? Please, we can’t see each other anymore.”

She was crying now, trying to punch him.

“What kind of choice is this? Adrian, please, we have to stop. I want out!”

Adrian was shocked, hurt and most of all, worried about her. This business was much worse than she had told Charles. She was losing control now. He looked at her wild and frightened eyes. He had to tell her what she wanted to hear. He held her and she began to calm down.

“Okay, Frances, please, calm down. This is getting too much for you, isn’t it, my sweet? Okay, calm down.”

He merely succeeded in making her cry more. He did not know what to do. When she eventually calmed down, he said, “Frances, I don’t understand what is going on. I wish you could tell me and trust me. But, I know that you won’t, not now, not ever. So, I think you are right. Okay, I will release you from the project, and from my ....me. Okay, we will stop. Okay?”

She simply nodded. She curled up against him and he left only when she was in her bed sound asleep. He let himself out, feeling the worst he had felt in many years. There was no way out from her and no way in. *It is a huge, fucking mess.*

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## Chapter 7

Frances stared out of the window. She took a deep breath to try to clear away the tightness that was developing in her chest. She wanted to clear away the knowledge, the decision. Tomorrow would be the last day that she would see him, hear his laughter and watch his eyes change from laughter, to anger, to pain, or just to plain sleepy. She knew it was the right decision to walk away from him, but the pain that she would never hear that strong, masculine voice again, chiding her, guiding her and protecting her, shot through her soul. *He is not mine. I have to simply comfort myself with the memory of his wonderful, raucous laugh, the way he throws back his head when he has a good laugh. The choice has been made and all that is left is to see him one more time....*

The next morning, she saw him walk towards her in the Board Room and her heart stopped beating. His tall frame made its way cautiously towards her, his eyes dark and intense. *What is he thinking? He looks so angry, so uptight, and oh, so beautiful.* He leaned down to her and greeted her politely.

“I’m fine, and how are you, Adrian?”

“Not pleased at all. We need to talk, tonight.”

“I don’t know if that ....”

She stopped suddenly as she saw some of the other members of the committee moving towards them.

“I don’t know that I entirely agree with that particular business plan. I don’t really see the point.”

“We shall see about that. I think you need a take a bolder, less cautious view about new possibilities and new projects. Projects of the past do not reflect the way of the future. As I indicated to you earlier, we must meet to discuss it further. Mike, how are you?”

He turned to his partner who was standing right behind him now. "I did not see you this morning. How is your Mina doing?"

"Fine. Everybody is fine. Hello Frances, are you well? Is our man giving you a hard time?"

"Yes, of course. As always. I am well, thank you."

"Mike, you should know better. She is being stubborn and cautious as usual. I have new ideas that I want to talk about, but she brushes me off."

He was smiling politely.

"Well, perhaps, during lunch, we can sit down and discuss it?"

He raised her eyebrows at her, his eyes hard and challenging.

"Of course." She smiled sweetly and left the two men standing there. She went to the ladies' toilet and took a long, deep breath. *I am going to kill him. We agreed it was over. How can he make me go through all of this again? He looks so handsome, standing there, talking as if it is the most natural thing in the world.* She would simply avoid him lunchtime and leave before the meeting was over. She would give her apologies and get out of there before her heart betrayed her.

Adrian watched her walk to the toilet and he felt his pulse slowing down a bit. The blood had been pounding in his head as they had spoken and he knew that if Mike had not been walking down the passage, he would have kissed her. She had looked at him, wide-eyed and afraid and he simply wanted to kiss her to make her relax and stop arguing with him. He wanted so desperately to touch her fingers as she waved her hands passionately when she spoke. She looked so vulnerable then and he needed so badly to be with her. He would not let it end, not today, not ever. She belonged to him and that is the way it was going to be. He knew he had agreed with her that they would stop seeing each other, but she had been so hysterical at the time, he had agreed. On reflection, alone in his large house afterwards, he realized that he would never let her go. He would tell her that today.

She came back when all the members of the committee were seated in the Boardroom. She carefully chose her place on the same side of the table with him, and he knew she would not bear to sit across from him, where he would look at her. He took a peek at her and she seemed calmer. He smiled at himself when he looked at her dark navy suit and

remembered how she wore it when she wanted to feel stronger. His smile widened at the thought how he had peeled it slowly off her body.

~ ~ ~ ~

Frances was nervous. She paced up and down her bedroom waiting desperately for Adrian to arrive. He was in that dark mood today and she knew he would be angry, because she had simply avoided him the rest of the day and had slipped out of the building. She desperately wanted to hold him one more time, but she knew if she saw him again, she would have to go through all the pain again. She could not avoid him forever and knew that if she hid away from him tonight, he would track her down and would make her pay dearly for ignoring him. So, after all the wavering and attempt to run from him, she decided she would simply wait it out. He had left a short, abrupt message on her cell phone. “Be at your place at seven.”

Was she being foolish to try to see him again? Wanting to see him again? Maybe she should simply leave her house, go out and leave him alone. *Yes, that’s what I will do. I need to leave right now.* She grabbed her handbag and went to the door. As she descended the stairs, she walked quietly, praying that he would not come up the stairs, catching her trying to escape. She was so relieved when she got to the bottom that she let out a long sigh of relief.

She fished for her car keys in her bag and stood dead still when she got to her car. Adrian was leaning patiently against her driver door, as if he had been waiting for some time for her to come to her car. He simply stared at her, his head tilted slightly.

“Hello, my dear. Going somewhere?”

“Urr, yes, I thought I would go out for some fresh air.”

He looked at his watch slowly and just stared at her. “Okay, let’s go. I will drive.”

“Ur, I wanted to be alone for a while. Well, now that you have arrived, I think we can go back upstairs.”

“Hmm, I see. It is very fortunate that I came to see if your car was here, don’t you think? I might have missed you.”

“Yes.”

*The bastard knows me too well.* How long had he waited here, knowing she would try to run away? She flushed at the thought that he caught her on the act. She looked up at him, but he seemed calm and oblivious to her embarrassment.

They said nothing as they made their way back into the house.

“Okay, Adrian. You said you wanted to talk. I must warn you, I have nothing to say. So talk.”

He closed the door slowly and deliberately settled himself on his favorite chair. She stood around awkwardly, not knowing what to do and where to sit. He simply looked her, from head to toe, as if assessing her appearance. She shifted from one leg to the next.

“Okay, let’s hear what you have to say.”

He looked at her and then said slowly. “Come sit down next to me. I might not bite you.”

“Adrian, please don’t tease me. This is not easy for me, okay?”

“Hmm. But I am a little angry with you. First you leave me looking for you lunchtime and then you try to run away from me tonight. What are you afraid of?”

“You.”

“Hmm.”

“Adrian, please. Just tell me what you felt was so important.”

“You are mine and you will always be mine. I will never let you go, unless you don’t want me anymore.”

She stared at him, her eyes wide with astonishment. She had not expected him to say that. His confident words shot through her body. She looked at him, willing her body not to go to him, not to find its way into his arms again.

“Adrian, please, we need to take control of the situation. This can’t go on. It can only hurt both of us.”

He got up and walked to her. He was watching her the whole time, how she wanted to be with him. He knew her wanton body language as well as he knew himself. He was going to have her, as long as she looked at him like that. He touched her lightly on her arm.

“Frances, come and sit down and stop looking at me like that, otherwise we will never get to talk, okay?”

She was staring at him, standing so close to her and she lifted her face to him. “Adrian, kiss me.”

His eyes lit up, the sound of his favorite words soothing, coaxing him. He leant down and took her lips, commanding her, directing their lust. She clung to him, as if it was the last time she would ever touch him.

They made love, half-dressed and Adrian smiled quietly. *This is way I like it.* He touched her gently and gently took off her clothes as they both lie on the floor.

“Isn’t it a bit late to undress me, Adrian?”

He laughed. “No, it is never too late to undress you and to feel your flesh, my dear. Anyway, I spent the whole meeting thinking of this moment, when I would peel your clothes off you.”

When he was through with his task, he caressed her legs gently.

“Frances, we must stop lying to ourselves. We belong together. There is no point in denying it. It hurts too much.”

“Hmm, can we go to bed? This floor is so uncomfortable.”

“God, woman, you always know how to say the right things to a man, don’t you?”

He was laughing as he lifted himself off the floor. He helped up and held her. “You always know how to speak to my heart,” as he ushered her to the bedroom. They lay in bed, trying to talk. They did not deal with the real issues and spoke about trivial matters. They knew that the real questions loomed like a large dark shadow over the bed in which they lay so comfortably.

As he lay in bed, his beautiful Frances curled up next to him, Adrian thought about how confusing everything was. He did not understand her, the way she was angry one moment and seducing him the very next minute. He was so confused about what she thought and felt and it frightened him. He had to come up with a good plan, because if he didn’t, she would simply run away. Adrian remembered the first time he had met her, how desperately he had lusted after her. He had assumed a little sex would have cured him. He never imagined that after they first made love she would ignite his heart and open up his

soul. It had never been the plan. *Damn*, she had to talk to him. This was not good enough for him anymore. He woke her up.

“Frances, good morning. I want to talk. I want you to stop the delay tactics and I want you to tell me the truth. Now, if I have to force you to talk, you will. Tell me Frances, about Kevin and you and all those bothering you. I want to know.”

She stared at him her eyes dazed. She was fully awake now and she moved off the bed, away from him. She looked at him and prayed that she was making the right decision.

“Adrian, please, before I start, I want you to promise me two things. One, that you are not going to get angry and two that you are not going to try and interfere.”

“Frances, don’t try and bargain with me. I want to know the truth. *We* will then decide what to do or not to do. I promise that I will keep my temper under control. Now talk.”

“Okay,” she sighed.

“After our first meeting, when you and Kevin accused us trying to play games and went on a complete mission about how we were not to be trusted, I got a bit suspicious. Both of you kept using a lot of words that Charles or I had used on the phone. But it had nothing to do with this project. We are so used to discussing things, that I guess a third person might read it the wrong way.”

“What words did I use that made you suspicious?”

“Well you asked me ‘what’s the trick?’ Now that is exactly what I had asked Charles the night before.” Adrian simply nodded. Kevin had told him that if there were any proposals, they should find out what the trick was, because there had to be one.

“Anyway, the next meeting, again, statements were made, mostly by Kevin, which suggested that someone was listening in. I worked by elimination and realized that my phone at work was bugged. We assumed someone in our offices was feeding the information to you guys. I assumed that you were part of it and knew.”

She stopped, waiting for him to explode. He said nothing, simply nodded.

“Well, then we found the bug. By that time you and I were, well, intimate. I could not say I thought you guys are doing it.”

“Why not?”

“Because I did not want to believe that you could do that to me, in view of our night time activities. I was getting really confused, because it was clear that your guys had done it and then I would be with you and you never once said or did anything to suggest that you were capable of doing it. It was difficult, especially because Charles desperately wanted to know.”

“Why didn’t you just ask me?”

“Because if you were doing it, you would have simply denied it and if you weren’t you would have been hurt and angry with me. I guess that was the problem. My involvement with you compromised my ability to do the right thing. I also could not bear the possibility that you were involved. At the back of my mind, I could not exclude it. So, I hoped that once the device was removed, all would be fine.”

“So, you were going to just let it go?”

“Yes. Adrian, yes. I was quite happy to pretend it never happened so I could be with you. Very unprofessional of me, I know. What else could I do?”

“Yes, okay, what happened that made you run away?”

“When I realized that my home phone also had a device. This time I did not tell Charles, because I would have been forced to tell him about you guys. Kevin called me in the passage one day and said something that I had said to Jamie. He was warning me that you are cruel and evil and that I should not ‘step on your toes’. He said something then and it clicked. He was listening at home. I was convinced by then that you were not involved. But, a few days later, you confirmed my worst fears. It had been early one morning Jamie and I were talking. I told him I was feeling a little ‘iffy’. Later that day, when you and I spoke, you said I sounded ‘iffy’. It completely freaked me out. If you remember, I then would not want you to come here. I got completely hysterical, because I desperately wanted to be with you and could not resist, but I needed to get away from you. Eventually, I just run away. That was the easiest thing to do. When I got back to your forced meeting, I was even more confused. You seemed not to have a clue.”

“Oh Frances, why didn’t you just ask me?”

“Are you crazy? And confirm it? I couldn’t Adrian. I just couldn’t. What would I have done if you said ‘yes’? I would have had to report it to the Party. I could never do that. Then I decided I would set you and Kevin up. Kevin played along beautifully. That day, in

your office, I realized that you had nothing to do with it. But I still couldn't explain how you seemed to know things."

"Well, I will tell you now. I remember that day. Because Kevin said he saw you in the morning at some meeting and you were looking 'iffy'. When I spoke to you, you really sounded like you were not too good. So the word came to me."

"Oh. Anyway, that day in your office, I finally knew that you were not involved and that he was doing it alone. I imagine that he stopped then. I debated whether to tell you, but there seemed to be no point. I had no proof, except now I was sure. Also, I knew that he was determined to get me and would simply find another technique. So I gave him stuff to confuse him. Jamie knows everything, so he played along when I asked him to. But nothing new had come to me, so I assume he has stopped."

"No, I am afraid not. This week he came to tell me about an illicit affair you are having with a 'hunk who is great in bed'. I like your description of me, by the way." He was smiling now.

"But he also seems to know that we are fighting. He told how the man refuses to take your calls and other similar things. All this happened after you confronted him, so I think he is still at it."

"Oh Shit, Adrian, I don't know what I might have said. I can't remember if I used your name."

Her face was white with horror.

"Frances, relax. He was desperately trying to find out who the man was. He even suggested it was Charles. He doesn't know, I am sure. Fortunately, we have used our cell phones most of the time. Kevin does not have the means or access to technology to bug your cell phone. He definitely does not know, but he is also definitely still out to get you."

"Oh Adrian, how can I stop him? I can't go to the police or the Party. I will embarrass your Party and will definitely destroy the project. What can we do?"

"Set him up again, Frances. You see, I am not sure that he is working alone. Charles and I have discussed it ...."

"What, Charles?"

"Yes, he told me that it was someone from your office."

“Charles talked to you?”

“Frances, Charles and I have known each other a long time. I think Charles knows more than he is pretending. For one, he did not need to tell me. He knows someone in my office is involved and wanted to alert me, in his own way. He knows that much. He told me because he wanted me to deal with it.”

“God, Adrian. What does this all mean?”

“Well, I imagine that Kevin is working with someone in your office and Charles wants it stop. He can’t do anything, because you won’t tell him anything. That is what I gathered from what he told me.”

“Okay, so you think that we have two of them, wondering around, checking up of me? What about you, Adrian, are they doing it to you?”

“No, we have along set up a system in my office which detects and destroys. I don’t have a landline at home for this reason. Cell phones are not easy to bug.”

“Adrian, what does Kevin want with me?”

“I don’t know Frances and I don’t know who is working with. If we know that, then we will know what to do. Who is it, Frances?”

“I don’t know. I always assumed that he worked alone. Nobody in my office has ever suggested information from my home phone, so I assumed nobody is involved.”

“Okay, I think this is what we are going to do. Jamie will phone you and you will tell him the name of a man, the illicit man. Let’s say we shall call him.... hmmm. Dave Burrows. He is an accountant in some town.”

“Well, okay, my lover Dave, he lives in where? Is he married?”

“Yes, he is married to some wealthy woman, I think. But has no children. He lives in Houston. Okay?”

“Adrian, is he great in bed? Do I enjoy him?”

“No, I don’t want to hear about that. Leave it alone. I will kill this Dave if he touches you.”

Frances was laughing. “Do you remember that Dave does not exist?”

“Still you must not even think about him, okay?”

“Okay. But what happens if Kevin confirms he is listening?”

“Then I will deal with him. Trust me, he will tell all.”

“Okay, do you want to do it now?”

“Yes, phone Jamie and tell him.”

She found her cell phone and spoke to Jamie. When she was finished explaining, Jamie said.

“Okay, but promise me one thing Frances, that you at least give Adrian a chance. He is good for you, not matter what you say.”

“Okay. Now phone me.”

The phone rang a few moments later. “Hello Frances, dear, how are you?”

“Fine, fine, Jamie. And you?”

“Great! Monique is busy cooking for me, can you believe it? She actually likes to do things for me. She is really great Frances. Your advice worked wonders. Anyway, I phoned to apologize for not coming over as promised. I got a little busy on the home front.” Frances laughed.

“You are such an evil man. But it is fine. I had a long meeting this morning, so I had things to catch up with.”

“So, how is your man, still fighting?”

“Yes, I am afraid. He keeps coming close and then running away from me. I don’t really know what to do.”

“Frances, I saw you with Dave Burrows at the coffee shop this afternoon. Is it him?”

“Really, where were you? I didn’t see you!”

“Yes, that is exactly the point. So, Frances?”

“Yes.”

“An accountant? God woman, are you mad? How dull is that?”

“Well, not as dull as you think...”

Adrian glared at her and she laughed.

“Okay, I see, but doesn’t he live out there in the bush somewhere?”

“Yes, Houston, and of course there the small technical problem of the wifey.”

“Shit, Frances, she is very wealthy, you know. He joined her father’s business. He will never leave her.”

“I know, I know, but I just can’t resist him. He looks at me and I just melt.”

She was looking at Adrian as she spoke and he just glared at her. He is so crazy, getting jealous over a fictitious man.

“Frances, listen to me, please. Leave it alone. Nothing good will come of it. Did you sleep with him again?”

“No, not yet, but maybe later tonight.”

She was smiling at Adrian as she spoke. Adrian watched her as she played with him. No matter what Tracy said, this woman liked to play games. She was doing it again, talking to someone else, but going straight to his heart. He wanted her to get off the phone, to stop playing with him and to go to bed. He wanted her now, so much more, because she was willing to give him the trust he so desperately desired. She stood on one leg and then shifted and he observed how she quietly seduced him while setting up his most trusted colleague. *I am going to go crazy if she doesn’t stop.*

“No, Frances, not tonight, not ever. When he comes to your door, send him to his rich wife. She is a total cow. If she finds out about you, she will make your life hell. She is not some sweet little brat. She is a strong woman who gets and keeps what she wants. Send him away, okay. Anyway he is a total shit to play with you that way.”

“I know all that. But can I do? He will touch me and then it will be over for me.”

“Okay, Monique and I are coming over tonight.”

“No, that’s not necessary. I promise I will send him away. You are right. You are right. If I feel that I am weakening, I will call you. I promise.”

“Okay, I will phone you early in the morning and see if he is there.”

“Okay, I promise I will behave. Now, go and help Monique cook, otherwise she will think you are a shit.”

“Okay, bye, Frances and behave.”

He hung up and Frances thought, *Jamie is brilliant.*

Adrian just stood there, watching her. “So, was I alright?”

“Hmm yes, too alright for me. I thought we agreed that there would be no sex with Dave?”

“There was no sex with Dave. I was talking to you.”

“Really? Now, let me see, I am your lord and master?”

“I was just teasing you. Don’t get any ideas.”

“Hmm. Are you are going to do as promised, my eternal slave, or will I have to whip you to perform?”

Frances laughed as he walked to her.

“Well, my lord and master, your wish is my command, but I promised Jamie there would be no sex....”

Adrian was kissing her now.

“That’s too bad. But since I am your master, I command you to take off my shirt, then my pants.”

“Yes, lord and master, as you wish.”

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Adrian woke to the sound of the phone. He woke Frances up and of course it was Jamie.

“Is he there?”

“No, Dave is definitely not here. But, I have other company.”

“What, what are you on about?”

“Hmmm, can’t talk now. Will tell you later.”

“Jesus, Frances. What is going on there?”

“Can’t discuss now. Bye.”

Adrian was laughing. “You are not capable of behaving, are you? Kevin will never be able to resist.”

“Yes, I thought I should push him over the edge. Anyway, Jamie really wanted to know if I had not done something awful to chase you away. That way, he knows you are still here.”

“Okay, now, can I get you coffee?”

“No, not yet. Adrian, what are we going to do?”

“Nothing now. Let’s deal with Kevin first. Later, we will talk. Okay?”

“I thought I was the one with delaying tactics.”

“Not now, Frances, let me just enjoy you without the complications.”

He was so serious Frances did not reply.

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## Chapter 8

Adrian went to work that morning, hoping that Kevin would not come to him. But he also pleased and relaxed with Frances. He was smiling to himself as he walked into his office, thinking how cute she had been to send him the flowers. His secretary looked at him as he walked passed her oblivious to her presence. *The man is surely in love. It must be with the one who sent him flowers. What a strange thing for a woman to do. But it seems to make him happy. He is in a lot better mood today. Who is she?* She was pondering this question when Kevin came in.

“Is the boss here yet?”

“Yes, he just walked in. He is a little busy now. I will tell him to call you when he is through. I think the woman who sent him flowers is on the phone.”

“What flowers?”

“Some woman sent him flowers and he is a good mood. I hope you have good news for him.”

“Oh yes, very good news.”

Kevin went back to his office. He had never really paid attention to Adrian's love life. He was not that interested in woman. He worked hard and he had short relationships.

Anyway, he thought his sister was a florist and he assumed she had sent him the flowers. They were close, so she must have sent them. No other woman would have dared to do such a thing.

About two hours later, Kevin was sitting across from Adrian in his office. His boss had a strange look on his face. *He seems upset by the news of Frances. It is very odd. Adrian should be over the moon. After all, she is just a slut, jumping into bed with everyone. Really, why Adrian should be upset is beyond me.*

Adrian eventually spoke. "Kevin, who is your source?"

"Come on, Adrian, we have discussed this before. I cannot reveal that."

"Well, there is a problem. I have received an allegation that our office has been bugging their offices. They think Mike and I are behind it. I don't know what to say. Kevin, have we been bugging their offices?"

"Adrian, don't be ridiculous!"

"We have a serious problem. The real reason they asked for a postponement on the meeting, they say, was to give us an opportunity to find out who is responsible. If we have no names by Wednesday, the deal is off. So, you see, you source could be the key. It appears that Charles and Frances are being bugged at work and home. Now that is a criminal offence. They won't press charges if we stop it. Kevin, again, who is your source?"

"Well, I don't know. Why do they think they are bugged?"

"They have found devices and worked out that we had information which linked directly to specific calls."

"God, are they crazy? Politics knows no secrets. Everyone talks."

"Kevin, are you going to tell me the truth or not? If you don't, I must tell you that they will institute criminal charges."

Kevin was quiet. *What should I do? That slut just couldn't let it go. She has cleverly put Charles in the pot to force Adrian to act. That is a good move on her part. Now, it is a*

*political issue. Shit, I have completely under-estimated her. She is now bringing in the political bosses. What can I do? Who can I name?*

“Adrian, let me think about it. I just don’t know...”

Adrian got out his chair. He was getting angry now. *This short little bastard has been spying on my woman and has the nerve to sit here so demurely like it is okay?*

“Kevin, I don’t have time for this crap. Tell me now or I tell Charles to go ahead with the investigation. They have the bugs in their possession. Do you understand what all this means to you and to me? Do you fully understand that someone has been violating their rights, in breach of an agreement that we don’t do that? Do you understand?”

Adrian was shouting now, standing over Kevin. Kevin was so terrified now, he thought Adrian was going to hit him. *Oh no. He is going to beat me up until I talk. Who shall I name? Who is the most likely suspect?*

“Well, Adrian calm down. Let’s be reasonable here. They can’t prove anything. The device could belong to anyone. It is a common thing.”

“How do you know it is a common thing?”

“I mean, I assume it is a standard device used in business.”

“How do you know it is a standard thing, Kevin? Answer the fucking question, you bastard, before I unleash the whole lot of them on you!”

“Okay, I know about the bugging. I know what the device is. But I also know is it so standard that it cannot be traced to anyone.”

Adrian collapsed in his chair. *Who is this man sitting here calmly, trying to lie his way out of it? Who is this man I have trusted for so long?*

“Kevin,” he was speaking softly now. “I am sorry that you have chosen not to be honest with me. Clearly, you want to play games. I have no choice but to hand over the evidence against you.”

“What evidence? Adrian, what are you talking about?”

“Kevin, you fool, you were set up. There is no man. There is no person called Dave Burrows. They made him up. He does not exist.”

Kevin's face collapsed into his chest. *No man? They knew all along that I had done it. More importantly, Adrian knew and played along?*

“Yes, Kevin, I had been told. We just had to wait to see who spoke about him. I am very sorry to find out it was you. I had hoped that nothing would come of it, that none of our people were involved. Fuck, Kevin, why and who helped you?”

Kevin knew that the only way was to tell Adrian the truth. He realized that Adrian was not telling him everything, waiting for him to slip up again. It was clear that Adrian had been aware of everything and was just trying to decide what to do with him. If he lied some more, Adrian would have him arrested. If he told the truth, he knew Adrian would have some mercy on him.

“Adrian, the thing is this. It was me. But I never had anything to do with Charles. I bugged her office with a phone device and her home with a line device. I could not get into her house, so it is on the line. I have a friend from the old days who knows how to do it. So, he went over there during the day and set it up.”

“Her office, how did you get in?”

“I told her secretary she was expecting me. I knew she was meeting with you that day. The secretary just assumed that it was okay. She was very sweet. She let me into her office, made me coffee and left me alone. She kept apologizing because she thought Frances had forgotten about the meeting. I was in there at least 10 minutes before she came in to say that Frances was at our offices. I just pretended that I had got the venues wrong. She understood and I left.”

“Who in their Party is involved?”

“Nobody, I swear. I would never trust them enough. There is no way I would ‘sleep with the enemy’ in that way. It would be too risky.” Adrian winced when Kevin said that.

“Kevin, why did you do it?”

“Because I knew she could make or break the project. I did not know which strategy she would employ. They did not want it, so it was a question of how they would get us off the topic. Well, I wanted to know. I thought she might try something feminine, like seduce you or me and try to get us off the project that way. When she did not do that, in fact she completely ignored you and treated me with contempt, I realized that her plan was far more sinister, so I listened and listened. She gave away nothing. Nothing at all. But you

see, Adrian, she has known all along, so she would not have revealed anything. I suppose after a while, I was just looking for something to hurt her and hoped that I could protect you if she went for you. I just got the impression that you two did not like each other much. She was so hostile to you at that one meeting after she vanished. I don't know, Adrian, she might be out to get you....”

“Stop it, Kevin. You are trying to tell me you did this for me? So why didn't you tell me?”

“Because I knew you wouldn't approve. I knew that you would tell me to back off. Anyway, I could not trust you with her. You desire her, don't you?”

“What, you were protecting me from myself? Are you listening to yourself? Is that what you are going to tell the police?”

Kevin was sweating now. *The police. So Adrian is planning to tell the police. He is not satisfied with the answers. Shit.*

“Okay, I knew about her before she came to the project. She helped with a restructuring process at Intertech. My brother was retrenched. She refused to listen to anything he had to say. She kept saying that he did not 'fit into their new culture'. It was over a silly racist incident. Anyone could have made that slip up. I mean, he just thought black women were easy, so he tried his luck. Really, Adrian, she was vicious with him. She had a restraining order placed on him. She would not have known he was my brother, because of our different surnames. So, I thought she was so damn perfect, I would find out something about her, something that would hurt her. I really thought there would be something. Instead that bitch just set me up, the way she did my brother.”

“What is his name?”

“Harry Nobel.”

Adrian raised his eyebrows. *Noble?*

“Adrian, I swear I know nothing about the issue of Charles. I had nothing to do with that. I would never dare. So that cannot be pinned on me.”

“What else do you want to tell me??”

“Well, the person in their Party who is spying on them has nothing to do with me. I worked alone to get her. Adrian she is so beautiful. She walks into the meeting and takes

control of everything. She is just a woman, why should she take control of us and our project?”

“Kevin, what are you going to do to repair the damage?”

Adrian was getting tired now. There was no hope. Kevin really hated Frances and it made him sick to listen to these justifications and explanations. He wished he could smash his face, make him beg for forgiveness, but he had promised Frances he would do nothing ‘macho and silly’. She had begged him to try to deal with things rationally.

“I don’t know. What can I do, Adrian? What can I do?”

“I think you should tell her and Charles and I will discuss it with Mike. If you don’t come clean with them, they will simply follow the legal process. Charmaine is not going to put up with that Kevin, you know that. I hope we can resolve it quietly. I will phone them and we will go over there. I hope they are not too angry. Maybe I can get them to keep it quiet. You have given them the biggest political bonus they have been dreaming about. They can blow us to hell. We would never recover from that.”

“Okay, yes. Adrian, I am truly sorry. I just thought it was the right thing to do.”

Adrian phoned Frances’s office. He spoke officially and requested a meeting with her and Charles.

“Adrian, is everything okay?”

“Yes, of course. All will be revealed at the meeting.”

When they got to the offices, Charles was aware of the problem, because Frances had briefed him.

“Okay, let’s get to the point. I believe Kevin had some information for us?”

Kevin spoke slowly. He made no eye contact with Charles and Frances. He seemed physically smaller as he sat in their boardroom. He told them everything that he had said to Adrian and tears rolled down his face as he spoke. Kevin felt hurt and betrayed. *Why is Adrian so angry with me? I was trying to help.* He wanted so much for Adrian to trust him. *Well, at least, Adrian is going to convince them to leave me alone.*

When he was finished talking, Charles rose from his seat. He was feeling a little confused. Frances and Adrian clearly had expected this. If there was nobody from his office

involved, who was Frances protecting? When did she and Adrian get so cozy? He was not sure what was going on, but he could see that Kevin was telling the truth.

“So, where to from here?” he asked, hoping the clouds in his brain would clear up.

“I want to know what is to be done by your Party about it. I want to know how you can guarantee that it won’t happen again. Why should I not simply go the police? Maybe he will tell us more, like the name of the person who did it at my house. This is bull shit. This sob story is not working on me. What are you, Adrian, going to do?”

Frances spoke in a strong voice.

Adrian was surprised at her tone. She was talking to him and to them again. *What am I going to do, Frances? Just love you, you fool*, he thought.

“Okay, Mike and I have discussed it. Kevin will resign and will no longer work for us. As to going to the police, we are hoping we can appeal to you not to. Quite frankly, we are in your hands now. We just hope that you will see that we are not involved in this, and not destroy all of us for one person’s personal vengeance. Frances, I know this is not easy for you, but I asking you to separate the problem from the rest of us. As to what we can do to prevent it from happening again, I think you are right. If Kevin was really sorry, he would have told us the name of the person. We could speak to him to ensure it does not happen again. But you are right, I do not have all the answers at this moment.” Frances flinched when he said that. He was staring straight at her, starting to get angry with her.

Charles watched the hidden layer between them and was totally surprised at the passion that flew between them. He should have seen it sooner. He should have known that the only reason she had not blown them away was because of Adrian. Of course, he saw it now, they way she had refused to tell him anything. Charles looked at her, her eyes flashing at Adrian. *Does she know she is in love with him? Does he know?* He doubted it. They were too busy taking over the world to notice these things. That is why she had run away. It was Adrian she wanted to protect. Charles smiled then. They would make a great couple, but he wondered what they would do about their politics. They disagreed strongly about many things and he knew Frances would never leave her Party for his. Neither would Adrian. Perhaps that is why they did not acknowledge the passion. It would be too difficult. *Imagine that, these two!* It would suit him greatly, actually, because then he would be sure that Adrian would always act in good faith and protect her. *Yes*, he thought, *it would suit me greatly.*

“Okay, I want a short caucus. Frances and I need to discuss this before we give you a final answer. Could you excuse us for a moment?”

In his office, Charles was smiling to himself. “Frances, when did you and Adrian come up with this?”

“Yesterday. Apparently Kevin was saying all sorts of personal things about me, so Adrian thought there was something naughty was going on. I had no choice but to tell him. I took the risk that he was not involved. I am pleased that I was right. I hope I am right.”

“Yes, I think you are. Adrian would never hurt you, Frances.”

“Oh Charles, you have such faith in people. How can you be so sure?”

“I just know, okay? Just in the same way you did not tell me all this because you thought he was involved. Frances, why did you want to protect him?”

Frances stared at Charles. *Fuck, he knows too much.*

“What could I do? If he was involved, the political costs would be as high to us as to them. Whatever we might threaten, we have no interest in going public with this. Any scandal is bad scandal. There would have been nothing to be gained. With the Kevin issue too. The whole project funding might be in jeopardy if there is any hint that the two Parties are misbehaving. Remember, we did not want it in the beginning. They can simply sell the idea that we are using our muscle to stop the project. Anyway you look at it, we have as much to lose as them. Also, how sure are we that there is nobody on our side doing the same thing? If we go public, they might be able to fight back.”

Charles watched her as she spoke. She was trying to convince herself that she had a sound political reason for her behavior. But he knew that she was just lying to herself. One day, she would realize that Adrian, the man, was the real reason. But for now, he would play along with her.

“Yes, you are right. But I think we can let them suffer a little. Also, I want one of our guys to talk to Kevin’s friend and remove the device today. Frances, if there is any other funny business, can you please tell me? I could have sorted this out a long time ago. Adrian is an honest man. He would have co-operated from the beginning. He is not that kind of enemy. It is simply ideological.”

“Okay, but I hope we won’t have this problem again.”

They went back into the boardroom. Adrian was looking out the window and Kevin was sitting in his chair. He had not moved. Adrian looked a little calmer now and he smiled at Frances and Charles as they came in.

“Okay, now what?”

“Firstly, we want the name of the man. He will go with one of our men to remove the thing. We want to talk to him. We want to be sure that he understands the problem. Secondly, we cannot agree on whether to go to the police with what we have. We will have to let you know, possibly tomorrow. Frances does not want to deal with that until she is sure there are no ears. Now Kevin, give us his name and we will phone him now, in your presence.”

Kevin spoke quietly. He knew he had been beaten by the slut. She was relentless. He saw the way she was flirting with Adrian. She looked at him with bold eyes and he clearly was not adverse to her advances. *Well, let Adrian suffer.* He had been warned about her. If he fell into that trap, then he deserved whatever he got.

When it was all over and Charles had confirmed the removal and that there were no others, Adrian thanked them for the calm and reasonable way they had handled it. He looked at Frances for a long while, as if deciding something and then he looked away.

“Now, we must go back to our offices. Mike will be going insane wondering what else has happened.”

“Yes, thank you for coming to us so openly Adrian. Tell Mike I will call him later.”

Charles spoke quietly when they were leaving.

Frances and Charles remained in the boardroom. “So when are you going to tell him that we are not pressing charges?”

“When he assures me that Kevin will no longer be a problem.”

Frances, relax, Adrian will do the right thing. He always does.”

Frances was puzzled by this comment and wondered if Charles knew about them. He had made too many suggestions today. But she dismissed the idea, thinking she was paranoid.

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## Chapter 9

When Adrian discussed the matter with Mike, Mike was quiet for a long time.

“Adrian, why did she co-operate so easily with you? What is in it for her?”

“I guess she doesn’t need the scandal either. The first time she set him up, you know, she just wanted to know details. There was no malice. She won’t go to the police. I know that, because they don’t need a scandal as much as we do. But I think she has to scare Kevin to keep him under control. He really hates her, Mike. It comes out of mouth like venom. What can we do to make sure he does not do worse?”

“Well, I said I had a plan. It is very simple. He left his last job because he was being investigated for fraud, some five million. They did not tell us, of course, because they were not sure. After he left, all sorts of things emerged. They did nothing because we would have been embarrassed. Now, I think the time has come to confront him with that. If he does anything again, goes near her, or anybody connected to her, we will get him charged for fraud and the interceptions. That is the cleanest way. She is no fool, Adrian. She has only given him the chance because of us, or rather you. If it does not stop, she will have no choice. I will speak to him about it. He is busy packing now. I will scare the hell out of him.”

“Yes, that seems to be the only thing he understands. Thanks Mike. Later, I need to talk to you about my own problem.”

“What, you too. Shit now what?”

Adrian laughed.

“No it is sort of a personal matter and I need your help. But, let’s get rid of that creep first.”

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Later, Mike and Adrian sat in their garden. Mike liked to sit here to talk, because it cleared his head. Adrian looked anxious, so he knew he was not going to enjoy this conversation.

“Oh Mike, things are so crazy. I love a woman I should not even think about. I love her so much that it hurts to be apart from her. Don’t look so horrified. It is not lust. I love her and I don’t know what to do.”

Mike was quiet for a while.

“What do you want to do?”

“I want her near me all the time. I want to hold her when her eyes look sad and worried. I want to make love to her when...”

“Okay, that is not what I was asking. Spare me the details. I mean, what do you want to do about her? Who is she Adrian?”

“Frances.”

Mike took a deep breath. *This business of politics still surprises me after all these years.* He was a seasoned politician, but maybe he was too old for these young people. Why can't they just have sex and get over it?

“Frances? Charles' Frances?”

“Yes.”

“I see. So how does she feel about this?”

“I think the same. We have been seeing each other from the first day we met. She tries to stop it, but, well, things just happen and we are back together again.”

“Adrian, does Kevin know about this?”

“No, I am sure he doesn't. Why?”

“Because if he does there is absolutely no chance for the two of you. Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I don't know what to do. What can I do? I really want to be with her. She hates having to hide and she says she felt compromised when all this Kevin stuff was going on. I need to do something to make it okay.”

“Oh Adrian, I don't know. If you go public, there might be some problems for both of you. I mean, people might be reluctant to tell you things about her Party if they know you will be in her bed that night. The same goes for her. Have you thought about that?”

“Yes, also, she is Charles's friend and she can't bear not to tell him.”

“Yes, I see, but the only thing you can do is keep it quiet. If it develops into something important, or long-term, then we can manage it publicly. If not, nobody is the wiser.”

“So I should just leave it alone?”

“Yes, Adrian, I know you don’t believe this now, but part of the allure is the fact that she is the Opposition. It makes you want to conquer them by having their women. It is the ultimate power. You sit in a meeting with them, listening to their silly debates, while you are merrily screwing their women. Someday, it passes and you feel like you have won. I have done it and everybody else too. But all of us go back home to the faithful Party. It is like an affair. It thrills, but later it chills. Let it run through your blood until it is over. Do nothing rash, please, I know from experience.”

“I doubt it is going to pass, but you are right. Let me leave it alone. Are you angry with me?”

“No, I did exactly the same thing, many years ago. You know Lavern Hatting, the Deputy President? She and I thought we would die if we were separated. We separated and we did not die. Now I think of her fondly, but not with the same lust. It was just a case of forbidden peaches. They are delicious, juicy and sexy. Adrian, you want her so badly because you can’t really have her. Well, not all of her. So when you have a small part of her, you feel the thrill of having beaten everyone in a game. I know. We all do it. Now, relax and let it take its course.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Now, any more surprises for today?” Mike smiled, the boy was in love.

“No, not at this moment.”

“Okay, leave me in peace in my garden. Go and do something useful.”

He watched as Adrian walked away. He knew, despite his words, that Adrian wanted more than sex from this woman. He loved her, but he did not know how she felt. He had seen her in a few of the meetings he attended. She had been cool and very rational. She might not care for Adrian as much as he did. But then, she could have caused real trouble for them over the Kevin issue. She had painstakingly tried to avert a situation where Adrian was hurt. At least she had integrity. That way, if it did not work, they would keep their professionalism. He thought about Lavern and how he had tried to run away from her. He had been wrong. He would always love her, no matter how much he denied it and wrote it off as forbidden fruit. He knew that everyone met the one person who made your heart sing and your body glow in delight. Lavern had been that woman for him and he had let her go. Now he avoided any functions where she was present, because he could not bear the longing for her, her sharp green eyes dancing at him, her quick wit and feisty bedroom

manner pushing him right over the edge of reality. He saw the same look in Adrian's eyes. He knew what it meant and all he could do is hope things worked out for them. He looked out at his garden and thought about wife, Mina. She had been a good loyal wife, but she would never turn his blood to fire like Lavern did. He went back inside and his longing did not pass. Finally, he did the thing he had promised himself he would never do. He phoned Lavern after almost fifteen years away from her.

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## Chapter 10

Mike was feeling a little nervous. Perhaps he shouldn't have called Lavern. She had been pleased to hear from him as if she had been waiting for his call. She had offered to meet him at her house on the beach for a drink. Her husband was away for a few days. *It had been too easy*, he thought. She should have told him to go away or agree to meet him in a public place. But he knew that if they met in public, the press would have made a great deal of it. The two of them, alone, would cause some political, if not sexual suspicion. They had enough trouble already. They did not need him to be linked in any way to the most powerful woman in the country. She was the opposition party and that was all he needed to complicate his life. He thought how Adrian must feel every time he saw Frances. The anxiety, the thrill and sheer power of knowing she was going to take him to heaven, every time.

He missed Lavern so much over the years and had never found a way to dull the pain. Many young women had been used to try to off-load the feeling of Lavern, but as he made love to them, Lavern's green eyes had laughed back at him, coaxing him, teasing him. Now, he was going to see her. He drove slowly, as if trying to avert a real danger. And perhaps he was in danger of his own weakness for her. Perhaps there was nothing to worry about. *Maybe she just wants to talk, for old time's sake*. They had been good together then.

When he got to the driveway, he saw that she had left a garage open for him. *Yes, there is no point in parking in the street*. He wondered where her bodyguards were. They followed her everywhere. He drove into the garage and went to the front door. He had not been inside this house, but had seen pictures of it. He remembered thinking that it was not her

style at all. It looked large and stately and he hated the long drive from the gate to the garage. She came to the door and simply looked at him.

“Mike, it’s been a while.”

“Yes, Lavern, it has been quite a while. May I come in?”

“Yes, of course. I just need to close the garage. Security measures, you understand.”

“Where are the bodyguards?”

“At home. They think I am sound asleep. I didn’t think it necessary to drag them out in the night.”

Mike laughed. He had forgotten how she spoke in euphuisms. They sat on a long green couch and he looked around. It broke his heart as he observed the uptight, stately furniture, the cold green carefully selected to create a feeling of power. There was nothing of his dynamic Lavern here. How hard it must have been for her, to give up everything for a political dream. She was good at her job, but he hated how little of the real woman he saw now. He had watched her on television many times and wanted to kiss her awake every single time. She needed to be kissed back to life. What had happened to her?

“I have made you a good old Scotch, with lots of ice, am I still right about that?”

“Yes, some of my tastes in certain pleasures have never changed. Thank you.”

As she handed him the glass, their hands touched lightly. He removed his fingers quickly, as if he had been burnt. She walked over to a stereo and he watched her walk, her thin pants revealing her legs against the light.

“What would you like to listen to?”

“You,” he said quietly

“Oh Mike, but no background music?”

“Yes, whatever. Lavern, come and sit next to me. Tell me how you have been.”

She put some music on and made her way slowly to a cabinet to collect her drink. He realised that she was afraid to be near him and the thought pleased him immensely. He felt the confidence of a young man when he was about to have his woman. *Yes, I will take her tonight, no matter what happens tomorrow.*

Lavern was feeling so self-conscious. He looked even more handsome now. His grey hair shone in the room and his body was spread confidently across the couch. His legs were wide apart. She wanted to walk in between those legs and make him take her. He had always been good at taking charge in the sex and she had enjoyed submitting to him. Would he still want her? She was so much older now, her body was not that firm and God forbid he should see her breasts. They had long lost their will to live and just dragged themselves along with her reluctantly. She looked at the man she had always loved and feared that he would not want her. She knew of his affairs with young women and it had sickened her heart each time. Would he want this older woman, who had rejected him to follow her political heart? Did he resent her? But she looked into his eyes and recognised his lust. She knew that look well. She smiled. *Please, let it be okay. Let me enjoy his love for one night.*

She sat next to him and tried to make small talk.

“So, how are things in your Party?”

“Fine, things are fine. A few small problems, created by your people, but Frances Pierce has been smoothing things over. She is great, that woman.”

“Yes, I know. She is quite remarkable. Tell me Mike, are you sleeping with her?”

“Oh no! Lavern, do you think I am crazy? She is very professional. She would hit me if I tried.”

“I have reason to believe that she is having an affair with one of your guys, or you. Apparently she spends a lot of time in your offices.”

“Yes, she is working on the Wilderness Project with us. Adrian works closely with her. All the meetings are in our offices, by agreement. There are least six people there at any time, so I think sex would be difficult. No, I have never thought of her that way. Also, I am not involved in that work.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Are you jealous, Lavern?” He smiled at her, knowing her had got her on the spot.

“No, don’t be ridiculous.” She looked away from him.

“Lavern, look at me when you speak. Have you forgotten how I hate that?”

“No, I haven’t,” she said softly.

She continued to look away and he moved to her and turned her head. Her green eyes look right at him and he saw how unsure she was.

“Lavern, now tell me, why you are so jealous?”

He was staring right back at her and the tears started rolling down her cheeks. Mike did not move. He held her face as her tears rolled onto his hand. Then he kissed her gently and quietly.

“Don’t cry.” They clung to each other for a long time, trying to melt away the years that had stood between them.

“Lavern, Lavern,” he whispered. “How I have missed you”

She cried more and he held her tighter. He lifted her face again and kissed away her tears. Their salty taste fuelled his lust and then Mike’s body took over. He pulled off her blouse as he kissed her and felt her undo his buttons. He lifted her off the seat and placed her on the thick green carpet. He slowly pulled down her pants and stared in fascination at her. He had missed that part of her body so much, the way it would fit so neatly when he entered her. His groin felt so hard and heavy that it hurt him.

“What is the matter, Mike?”

“You are so beautiful Lavern, so damn beautiful.” Lavern smiled. She spread her legs wider at his encouragement and he touched her. She cried at the pleasure of the hands that been away from their home for so long. Slowly he entered her as if he was afraid he would hurt her. Then he just lost it. She was lifting herself to him, begging him for more and he felt the full thrust of his body inside her. It was over so quickly that they stared at each other, wanting more, needing more. Mike lay on the floor besides her. “Lavern, Lavern, Lovely Lavern.”

He ran his fingers down the side of her body, entranced by the familiarity of the woman he loved so much. She touched his hands as they moved over her.

“Mike, Mike, magic Mike, you are the most glorious man I have ever known.”

He looked at her.

“Hold me, Magic Mike.” He lay over her and kept her in his arms. He smiled. He had forgotten she had called him Magic Mike, because she liked sex so much. He smiled as he thought how she had liked to submit to him. *Well, tonight I will do my best to please.*

“Mike, please, can we go to the bedroom?”

“Yes, my dear, lead the way.”

He held her as they made their way to a dark, large bedroom with a huge bed. When he saw the bed, he shoved her onto the bed. She was giggling, because she knew what he wanted.

“Lovely Lavern, assume the position.”

She said nothing, but lay flat on her stomach. He went to her and lifted her legs and as she knelt there, on the edge of the bed, he placed his hand on her buttocks and caressed her. He liked it when she was so quiet and doing as she was told. When he entered her this time, she moaned so loud he thought the neighbours would hear. She had missed the way had known how to make love to her. She had missed the way he would just do it the right way for her. She had tried so many times to get her husband to do this, but it had felt sleazy. Mike knew how to take her from behind and stay with her. She could feel his hands gripping on her buttocks for support and she rose to such high depths she thought she would burst.

When they were through, they lay on the bed, too exhausted to speak. She curled up into his body and felt like she had returned home from a long trip in a foreign land. Mike was also feeling very homely. He had forgotten the euphoria of perfect sex. He had forgotten what it felt like to real *take* a woman. He lay there, thanking God that he had this opportunity again. They fell asleep on top of the covers in each others' arms.

In the morning, it was Mike who woke up to realize that he did not know where he was. Lavern was fast asleep. He woke her and she stared at him in disbelief. *Am I dreaming?*

“Lavern, it is five. Wake up, we need to go back.”

“Mike? Mike?”

“Yes?”

“Are you leaving?”

“Yes, Lavern I have to go. My wife must be going crazy not knowing where I am. I told her I would be late, but I think she will not take kindly to this.”

“Hmmm, okay, I suppose I should get back too. The bodyguards will have a fit if they think I am missing. Will I see you again, Mike?”

“Yes, Lavern, you will see me again. I don’t think we have any choice.”

He kissed her lightly on her cheek. “Thank you for a wonderful night. Thank you for being you. Thank you for wanting me.”

She hugged him and watched him leave. She felt like the happiest woman alive.

She got into her car and drove home. She crept into her house quietly, hoping the guards did not notice. But she realized they were all still fast asleep. She changed into her pyjamas and made her way to the kitchen. One of the guards was sitting at the kitchen table. *Shit, did he hear me come in?*

“Hi, you are up early.”

“Yes, I thought I heard someone come in.”

“Oh yes, I have been outside for a bit. It was me. Thanks. Some coffee?”

“No thanks ma’am. I will leave you alone now.”

She sat at the kitchen table, drinking her coffee and thinking about Magic Mike. She would have to find a way to see him. She had no intention of letting him go now.

Mike drove home, thinking how much he had missed her. He wondered if they would see each other again and tried not to think about it. He filled his mind with excuses he would give his wife Mina when he got back. Why had he not phoned? Why had he stayed out all night? But when he got home, she was sound asleep. He crept into the bed and pretended to sleep. A few moments later, she woke up, saying he should get ready for work. He got out of bed and she continued to sleep. *Thank God.* He could not face her now. He kissed on her cheek and left for work. He was hoping that she had fallen off to sleep and did not notice that he had been out. She sometimes took sleeping pills and she would have no concept of time. He would find out when he got home tonight. Meanwhile, he felt invigorated and was ready to take a new day with all its problems. He sent her a short message on her cell phone. *Lovely L, you are wonderful. MM.* He smiled and waited for his meeting with Adrian.

When Adrian arrived, he immediately noticed the difference in his friend. His eyes were bright and clear and he almost had a smile on his face. He was looking like he had won the lottery. His cheeks were slightly flushed and he looked ten years younger.

“So, had an interesting night?”

“Whatever do you mean, Adrian?”

“You look so wonderful today, like you have had the best experience of your life. You look transformed.”

“Yes, perhaps. Now, is everything done with this Kevin business?”

“Yes, Frances confirms that there will be no criminal or civil case.”

“Oh that is very kind of her. Did she say this while you were holding her in your arms?”

Mike was laughing.

Adrian just stared at him. Had he gone mad? He had gone off early last night, to some meeting and when he tried to phone at home, Mina said he had not returned. He had no idea what meeting it was, but it was definitely doing him a world of good.

“I am teasing you Adrian, I am just teasing.”

Adrian left his office a little perplexed. Mike did not tease. He did not know the meaning of the word tease. *Where is he getting this stuff from now? He is probably having an affair.* He was renowned for his little indiscretions, but they never seemed to affect him. *This is definitely different. Well, good for him.* His wife clearly did not care much about him and simply liked his status. *At least someone is making the old bugger feel alive.*

Adrian went out to the coffee shop downstairs. He was starving. He had a silly little sandwich last night, because Frances had been in no mood for food or cooking. He could eat a horse right now. He and down sat and ate a delicious breakfast. *Great, now I can face the day.*

He went to his office and called her. “Frances, are you okay?”

“Yes, I am fine. I just feel so tired after all this. Anything new?”

“No, he has left and I will tell you later how we dealt with him. I phoned to ask to you to dinner tonight. My place.”

He was touching the petal of a large orange flower from his desk. He felt its velvet glow on his fingers and wanted to touch her.

“Frances, I am already missing you and you haven’t left yet.”

“Yes, I know, but now I really need to go and try to get all this stuff out of my system. I still feel uncomfortable about talking on the phone.”

“It will pass. Now, I will pick you up at six. We will make something together.”

“Okay, lord and master, as you wish.”

She laughed, because she knew how much he liked to feel he was in control. Frances sat back in her chair. She was still a little afraid of him, of saying things to him. He had that maverick, unpredictable quality about him. She wanted to spend the rest of her life trying to work him out and what made him tick. She liked the way he held her close to him, as if closing off the world. She really liked all of him, even when he was being difficult and unreasonable. But tonight, it would be nice to do regular things with him, without the figure of Kevin looming large over them.

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When he arrived for her, he pushed her inside her house and kissed her. He looked like he had been waiting his whole life for that moment.

“God, you are beautiful.”

“Adrian, please, can you try and behave a bit? Can we go now?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Not until you kiss me, hold me and give me an incentive.”

“As you please...”

When they left, Adrian was feeling warm and content. He was with the most wonderful woman in the world and he liked it very much. Frances was feeling horny and edgy. She needed to feel him inside her and her teasing kisses had done nothing to alleviate the need.

The whole day, as they spoke to Kevin and tried to work through the issues, she needed to feel him inside her. It was the simplicity of that desire which was driving her wild. *Adrian is so relaxed*, she thought. *He is going to want to talk and tease and play. All I want tonight is the end result of that. I don't want to cook or eat or anything*, she thought sullenly. They drove in silence, both deep in their own thoughts.

Kevin was sitting in his car drinking tea from his flask. He had stayed outside her house, hoping that the mystery man would appear. He knew there was a mystery man. He had been sure of that. He had heard the pain in her voice and the desire when she spoke about him. He almost spilled his tea when he saw Adrian's car stop outside. He watched as Adrian shoved her inside. It took them a while to leave. The shock of the knowledge rocked Kevin. *Adrian? He is the man? That is not possible! Adrian is the man who did all those things to her? My boss? The cold, distant man who only spoke about work?* He was completely stunned. *Perhaps this is a new trick to see if I am still misbehaving. Of course, that is it. They knew I would try one last time and they were pretending to be lovers. Damn, this woman is good. Well, I am no fool. This was the final straw. They must be mad if they think I am going to spread that story and then be charged with fraud. Fuck her. She is not that clever. She is just setting me up so I can get to go to prison. Well not me. What that bitch doesn't know is that I have averted prison at least three times before in my life and no woman is going to bring me down.* He had a last look as they jumped into Adrian's car. They were talking about something and it looked like normal polite stuff. He started his car and drove home, thinking what he would tell Charmaine. Perhaps she would be happy if he said there had been irreconcilable political differences. He and Adrian had often argued over the phone and she would accept it. Tomorrow, he would find a new job marketing something. He was good at that and he knew that he would be snapped up. But at least now he knew that he would not get involved with Frances. She would send him to jail if she had half an excuse.

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## Chapter 11

Frances drove down to her parents' house on the beach. They lived right on the beach and she liked the clean fresh air. It was only a seventy-minute drive from town, but it felt like she had driven forever. She thought about Adrian and how clingy he had been last night. She did not really want to leave him for so many days, but she knew that things would quickly spill over if she stayed. Her parents were expecting her and would be pleased to see her. She avoided visiting them when she was morbid, because they would probe until she told them everything. She drove past one of the stately houses. It belonged to the deputy president, but she was never there. Her parents were only two houses away. When she arrived, her father was sitting on the porch still reading the daily newspapers. He got up when he saw her car and her mother came running out of the house. Frances hugged them and went inside. They chatted about work, and other things, but her father knew she had something to discuss. She went up to her old room and sat on the balcony watching the waves rushing in. She took a deep breath and savored the fresh taste. It was good to be back.

She chatted to her parents and went into the small village to do some shopping for them. Her mother was delighted, because she hated having to do shopping. She was a gardener, she would say, not a shopper.

That night, she cooked for them and enjoyed their pleasant chatter. They went out outside to listen to the waves. Frances' phone was ringing.

"Hello, Adrian."

"Hi, are you alright?"

"Yes, I am perfectly alright. I feel really, really fine. But I wish you were here."

"Hmm I am sure. But some of us have to work. Now, tell me, are your parents happy to see you?"

"Oh yes, I am spoiling them, cooking, feeding, shopping and they feel like children. I don't think my father is ever going to let me leave here!"

"Oh yes he will. I will come and drag you back. I know where you are, remember?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Oh Adrian, I am missing you so much."

He was silent for a while. He was not sure what this meant. Was she accepting their relationship, or was she just feeling sexy?

“Okay, goodnight Frances.”

“Goodnight, my lord and master.”

Frances put her phone down and looked out of the balcony. She could have sworn she had seen a light go on in the deputy president’s house further up. But it was dark when she looked again. *No, I must be imagining things.*

“Dad, who lives in Lavern’s house when she is away?”

“Nobody dear. She likes to keep it private. Why?”

“I thought I saw the light come on.”

“I doubt that. She sometimes comes here over the weekend, not in the week. She is a very lonely woman. Her husband never comes here. I think I only saw him once, when she had a party. Otherwise, she wanders around alone, no bodyguards, no fuss. She likes to come down to the beach over there. She is quite sweet. Everybody leaves her alone.”

“Yes, Dad, she is sweet. A little too quiet for me, but she knows what she is doing. Anyway, it must have been my imagination.”

“Frances, are you seeing someone?”

“Oh Dad, such a bold question. Yes, but it is complicated.”

“Tell me.” She sighed. She told about Adrian and he smiled. “So you see, it is complicated.”

“Okay, if you say so. But Frances, you always think life is complicated. Sometimes it is a lot easier than you think. You need to decide what you really want and then the answers will come to you. Right now, you want to believe that there are conflicting choices, him or your life. Have you considered the possibility that he might be part of your life? Oh Frances, if you want to be with him, there is always a way. What you need to decide, my dear, is whether you really want him.”

He looked at her for a long time. “Okay, no speeches. Good night.”

He went off the bed. Frances walked over to the beach. She sat on the sand and loved the way the night air felt so passionate and unspoiled. She was lying on the ground now, close

to their house, when she saw the light again. It was at the back of the house. It was clearly on and she saw a figure move over to the window. It was dark and too far, but she recognized her immediately. She was standing there, breathing in the night air. Another shadow came up and she knew exactly who it was. It was Mike. She lifted her head for a better view. Mike was holding her in his arms and they were simply enjoying the night air. Frances stared at them. *It is not possible. Surely not.* She watched them for a while, but they just stood there. She got up off the beach and walked onto the street. *Perhaps Mike's car is there.* But there was no vehicle and all the lights were off. She went back onto the beach, but there was nobody on the balcony. *Yes, I am having a real weird hallucination.* She did not want to accept the possibility that Mike and Lavern were lovers. It just seemed too much of a pattern. She was with Adrian, and Lavern was with Mike. It was too much to accept. So she shut the idea out of her head and thought about how beautiful the night sky looked. She wondered back into the house and fell off to sleep.

When Adrian phoned her on Saturday, he seemed a little quiet, but was pleasant and polite. Adrian spoke about general things that had happened in Parliament in the two days that she had been away.

“Frances, are you okay?”

“Yes, of course. I feel really relaxed here. I think I just needed to get away from.... well everything. The tension about Kevin and the secrecy with you. Now I feel fine.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Adrian, what is the matter?”

“Nothing, I just want you to come home now.”

“Oh Adrian, it has only been two days! I....”

“Come home. I miss you. I worry about you. Anyway, it is two nights.”

“Oh, I know what you miss!” she laughed.

“No, Frances, I am serious.”

“Okay, I know what you mean. We have got into a routine that it so difficult to break. I know how I miss you at night and in the morning when I have to beg you to wake up and how you hate my phone to ring in the morning.”

“Hmmm, is that all you miss?” His voice was hoarse now.

“That too, I miss that too. But I need to spend some time with my parents. I really do, Adrian. Okay, I will come home first thing on Monday morning. Is that okay?”

“No, but if you insist.”

“Tell me about things at work.”

“No, I don’t want to talk about that. I want to talk to you.”

“Adrian, what is the matter? Is something wrong?”

“Nothing. Sorry, I am just feeling a little gloomy. It is Saturday night and I am sitting all alone, wondering why you just can’t come to me.”

“Adrian, please tell me what is wrong.”

“What is wrong is that I don’t want you to go away without me. If you need a break, we will take it together.”

“Yes, okay.”

“Now go to bed and let me sulk in peace. Goodnight.”

“Okay, goodnight.”

He hung up the phone and Frances was a little annoyed with him. He was being a little possessive and childish. Tracy had been right about him, about his need to always be in control. He was angry because she did not simply pack and go back home. Frances went out to the beach. She really did not know what he wanted from her. He knew her well enough to know she would not give in to his sulking. He was being totally unreasonable. Did he expect her never to go away alone, ever? But she knew what he was concerned about. She always ran away when she could not deal with him. And he was right. Frances had realized for a while now that she loved him and it frightened her. What would happen to them? Would they live their lives in secret forever? Would they be willing to take the relationship further? Frances knew that Adrian was thinking she would come back and tell him things were off again. She had done it before, so he had every reason to believe she would do it again. Perhaps, she needed to talk more openly with him.

She went back inside and called him.

“Yes, Frances?”

“Adrian, I am sorry that you are angry with me.”

He said nothing.

“Adrian?”

“Yes, dear?”

“What do you want of me?”

“Nothing, Frances, nothing. Look, leave it alone. I told you that I was feeling a little down.”

“Adrian, what do you want of me?”

“Damn! Okay, if you want to hear it, then there. I want to stop keeping your barriers up against me. I want you to stop running away every time there is a problem. Talk to me, woman. Tell me what is bothering you! I want you, for once, to do something emotional, not rational. I want you to run to me, not decide whether it is strategic or not! I want you to care so much you can’t bear to run away from me. There. Are you happy now?”

“Oh Adrian, I am not running away from you. I promise. I just .... I just don’t know what is going to happen, then I get a little scared and cautious. It is hard to sit across from you, trying to think of complex issues, when I want to curl up in your lap and tease you. It is hard to try and concentrate on difficult things when you are looking at me like you want to undress me. It’s hard, because I can’t just come to you. Then it gets too much and I want to run away.”

“Hmm, like now?”

“Yes, Adrian, like now. Are you angry with me?”

“Yes, but I suppose I should save my anger till the day you come home, then I can show you how angry I have been!”

He was laughing now, because he knew her eyes would be wide.

“Great, you are now laughing at me!”

“Yes, I feel a lot better already. The more you suffer, the better I feel.”

“Piss off, Adrian, just piss off!”

He was laughing hard now. “Oh Frances, you are great. You always know how to make a man laugh.”

Frances said nothing.

“Okay, now my dear, I feel a little better. Thanks for phoning me. Now go to bed and let me go back to my television viewing.”

“Okay, good night.”

Adrian smiled to himself. He was very pleased that she had called him. He liked it when she did something without any encouragement from him. He never felt sure that she cared and she had given a little hint of that caring today. He liked that very much. He thought how different things were now. When he first met her, he had so desperately wanted her to recognize, celebrate and submit to his power. Now, he just wanted to know that she loved him. He wanted to hear her say those words and for her to do something wild and spontaneous. He wanted her to give him all of her, no strategy, no thinking. He wondered if she would ever give him that.

Frances was also smiling. Adrian could be so crazy sometimes. He needed to know he was the boss and if he got a hint that she was vulnerable, he got so excited. She decided that she would have to do something to make him feel better. He was right about her putting up her barriers. She was too scared to let him into her heart, but she wanted to laugh at the irony of that. Because she had spent a great deal of time trying to keep him at a sexual level, but had only succeeded in letting him dive straight into her heart. At the back of her mind, the fear that it will all end in a messy bang loomed large.

Frances thought of her parents, the way her father read the newspaper and her mother a dark, black book which looked ominous. Frances watched them often, so comfortable with each other. There was no tension or stress. She envied their ability to take life so easy.

Her mind was suddenly flooded with thoughts of Adrian and the way he made her want sex so badly. *Is it just lust? Will it pass?* She wondered whether they should just let it work its way out of their system. *No harm done.* But deep down she knew that she used the sex to fill the other spaces, the need to talk about them and where it was going. But sex was not a bad strategy at this stage of the game. She needed to relax more around him and accept the way things were. But she missed not been able to go places with him to hold

him in the street, or go the movies or to do their shopping together. She missed not having the public side of him. And deep down, she knew she wanted all of him. She fell off to sleep, hoping she could develop a strategy in her sleep.

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Two houses away, nobody was going to bed or watching television. Mike had come for his 'beach visit' as he called it. Lavern was waiting for him impatiently and he liked the look of relief when she saw him. He liked it when she looked so desperate for him, because it allowed him to disguise his own desperation. He walked up to her and kissed her cheek.

"Lavern, how are you my dear?" he said casually.

"Fine, fine, it's been a long day. I went to the beach earlier and just sort of tried to relax."

"Why, was it bothering you?"

"You, of course. I wished you had come earlier and I got all angry with you and with me. But it is a good thing you didn't come earlier. I saw your precious Frances on the beach. So we had a little chat."

"Frances Pierce?"

"Yes, her parents live over there. She sometimes comes here. I haven't seen her here in a while. A few weeks at least."

"Oh, that interesting. Adrian told me that she was away at her parents. Was she alright?"

"Oh yes, she looked really relaxed. We talked a bit about Party politics."

"Hmm, now let me decide what I will do with you tonight."

"Really, *you* will decide"

"Yes, Deputy-President, *I* will decide how best to torture your desire tonight. Let me see, no, maybe *I* will see and you won't. Yes, tonight I will blindfold you and have my way with you."

Lavern smiled. "Yes, dear, whatever you desire." She spoke in a soft voice.

He leaned over and kissed her roughly. She tried to move away, but he held her tightly.

"Where do you think you are going?"

"Ur...."

“Now, be a good girl. Take off my tie.”

“Yes.”

She took off his tie, her eyes shining in anticipation.

“Now, turn around.”

She turned slowly. He took the tie and placed it over her eyes.

“Now, I will lead you to a place where I will take great pleasure in your body.”

He led her away, holding her firmly. She thought he would go straight upstairs to the bedroom, but, he turned left. *Where is he taking me?*

He opened a door and she smelt the soft, pine smell of her desk. He took her to the edge of the desk and he heard her papers being moved.

“Sit.”

She edged her way onto the desk and he slowly took off all her clothes. He said nothing and it seemed like hours while he slowly peeled off each item as if it would disintegrate. He did not touch her skin much and she felt the swell of desire building inside her. She wanted him to touch her, caress her, to feel his flesh on her skin, but he knew that, so he kept away from her flesh. When she was completely naked sitting on her desk, he walked away out of the room. *What is he up to?* She licked her lips in anticipation.

“Mike?”

“Shhhhhh,” he whispered in her ear.

“I am right here.”

“Mike?”

Why had the door opened and closed? He cupped her breast with one hand and held it there for a while inspecting it.

She held her breath, “Mike, please, please.”

“No, my dear, be patient. Now I want you to lie back. Let me help you.”

Then she heard him take off his clothes. She was getting excited now. *Let him come inside me.* She sighed in anticipation. *At least the wait is over.*

The silent was unbearable. He seemed to have taken on a whole new mood. She felt his hands on her thigh and he spread her legs wide open on the desk. He touched her toes, her legs, her knees and her thighs. He caressed the inside of her thighs and she started to get herself ready for him. But then suddenly, he touched her stomach. Lavern moaned in protest. "Oh Mike, go down there, please!"

"Shhhh. *I will decide, remember?*" and just to spite her, he moved further away up to her breast, her neck and her cheeks. She felt every sensation as his fingers touched lightly and then firmly. Her whole skin was alive with tingling sensation. Then suddenly, he placed his hand gently on his favourite part, the part he loved so much. Lavern was thrilled. *At last. He will take me now.* But Mike simply touched her and then slowly placed both hands and parted her. He had her opened wide, as if he was inspecting her. He held his peach wide open for a long time, savouring the power, the thrill of knowing he could do whatever he wanted with her. The knowledge surged wildly through his body.

"Mike, oh God please. Go inside!"

"Shhhhhh, or I will take even longer," and to prove his point, he held her open for what seemed like an eternity. She moaned and cried in protest and then as a concession to her, he gently inserted one finger at a time. Lavern was frantic. Slowly, he inserted his finger then gently took it out. He continued like this until she thought she would burst and then suddenly he stopped. He let go of her completely. She panicked for a moment. *Is he going to leave again?* Then her body sang with joy as he finally entered her. She was completely, desperately overjoyed to finally feel him inside her. Lavern was frantic as their bodies thrust wildly together. She cried and moaned and groaned. She felt her body going higher and higher on its pleasure orbit until it was over in a frenzied vibration of ecstasy. He collapsed between her legs. She clung to him, her body spent with pleasure.

"Oh, Magic Mike!"

Mike was smiling. The most powerful impetus to his lust for Lavern was the way she begged him to enter her. He loved it and the totally helpless way she looked afterwards, spread wide open when he had taken her.

He took his tie from her eyes and she blinked for a while. She had almost forgotten that she could not see him all this time. His desire had been so strong and torturous that she had been lost in her sense of touch and desire. Mike helped her off the desk and they went into the lounge and sat on a couch, clinging to each other. *This man knows me too well,*

she thought. It was the first time since they had resumed their relationship that they both had nothing to say.

When they were in bed later, Lavern asked him, “Mike, why did you open and close the door?”

“To disorientate, of course. To frighten you with the endless possibilities of the bad intentions I might have had. I like it when you are scared. It makes you so horny.”

She laughed. “Mike, you are evil and it was wonderful!”

That night, with Mina away for the weekend with friends, Mike relaxed because he was going to sleep in the arms of his forbidden peach. He fell asleep, dreaming of juicy, ripe peaches falling all around him. He was in heaven.

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## Chapter 12

Adrian tried to concentrate on the debate that was going on in Parliament. It was a silly issue, whether to amend a piece of legislation that had been long overdue for amendment. A minority Party, trying to use its little political muscle, was asking stupid questions that made no sense at all. He looked at Charles and saw he was also getting agitated. Charles despised cheap politics and answered all the questions in a clipped, hostile manner. Eventually, frustrated by this pathetic ploy, he suddenly stated, “Chair, I mean no disrespect for my dear colleagues here. But these questions are frivolous and taking the matter nowhere. If there are more questions of this nature, all members are free to come to my department and we will engage in a few lessons on the basic matters of land ownership. But, these amendments are merely intended to bring the Land Ownership Act in line with the Protected Areas Act which we passed last month at the behest of the very Party now asking questions.”

There was a general round of applause. *Thank God Charles has spoken out or this could go on for hours*, Adrian thought. His mind was on Frances. She would be back this morning and he wanted to see her. But Mike had set up a tedious meeting with some ‘greenies’ who wanted a report on the Wilderness Project. Adrian was mildly irritated,

because he had invited them to participate right at the beginning. But he knew they did not like to do the work, they simply wanted to sit around, hoping they could find something to criticize. Perhaps he should unleash Frances on them. She would definitely get them off his back.

When it was finally over, he went outside for some fresh air. He looked at his cell phone. He had a message from her. "I am back. Do you want anything special tonight?"

He smiled to himself. *She is trying to make up with me. She knows that I am still angry with her for not coming back earlier.* She must realize that she was wrong not to come to him when he was miserable and needed her. But she didn't know that he also realized how wrong he had been. He knew he was being unreasonable, but a small glimmer of anger lingered in him. He knew that she would always go and visit her parents, but his ego wanted to be affirmed that she would simply come back when he wanted her to. He wanted her to come to him and that was that. They had had a huge argument last night and she had hung up on him, accusing him of 'stark, raving lunacy.' *Okay, perhaps it was a bit much to expect her to come racing home in the middle of the night. But at least she should have said she wanted to.*

*She wants to make up? Okay let's play,* he thought.

He wrote back. "Lamb roast with potatoes and lots of veggies."

He would love to see her reply. He wanted to laugh as he thought of her expression when she read that. She would be horrified. She would tell him that she was not his cook, his maid, etc. He knew he was deliberately goading her and he was enjoying it. She would be pacing up and down now saying, "who does he think he is?" *I am pleased. She should never have refused me. Let's see. She will try to make a romantic dinner.* He would invite Mike for a drink tonight with her. That will thwart her plans for manipulating him with her seduction.

He entertained himself the rest of the afternoon with thoughts of his sweet revenge on her. He only phoned her on his way back home.

"Hello, listen, Mike is coming up with me. We have some business to discuss. Okay?"

"Yes, okay."

"Fine, we will be there in about five minutes."

He hung up the phone. She sounded a bit disappointed and he was pleased. *Let her think I am still angry.*

When they arrived at her house, she was busy on her computer. She smiled politely at Mike and offered him a drink. She spoke briefly to him before she excused herself. Adrian was a little slighted that she had ignored him. She had not even bothered to look at him. He left Mike in the lounge and followed her to the kitchen.

“So how are you?” he asked sweetly.

“I’m fine thank you.” Her voice was curt and polite.

“You look very pretty in blue. I like that dress.”

“Thank you.”

He moved towards her to hold her, but she moved away. He was getting agitated.

“Come here, now!”

She turned to him and saw that he was getting angry. *Good!* She thought. She dashed quickly out of the kitchen and made her way to the bedroom. He could do nothing while Mike was there. However, to her surprise, he followed her and stood at the door.

“Come here, woman. Do you want me to come and get you?”

“Okay, what do you want?” She walked slowly towards him, ignoring his impatience.

“I want you to come into my arms and greet me properly.”

He held out his arms to her. She hesitated for a moment, but saw the determined glint in his eye. She went to him and slipped into his arms.

“Hello, Adrian, how was your day?” She was mocking him and he knew it. He held her for a while, kissed her lightly and turned to leave.

“I will deal with you properly later.”

She smiled at his anger. *He always expects to get what he wants.* No mind, she would make it up to him later.

Mike stayed a short time, briefly discussing some of the ideas the ‘greenies’ had raised. He looked unenthusiastic, but Adrian had dragged him here, insisting they should talk to Frances. But he realized that Adrian was playing some game with her and he smiled when

he watched Adrian's face. He was clearly not winning. *Great, he needs a woman who can set him straight.* He watched Frances and the calm way she listened to his explanations while Adrian tapped his fingers impatiently. *This poor bastard has absolutely no control of his peach.*

"Well, I think that is it. I apologize again, Frances, for imposing on you."

"It is no problem, really. I am glad you came over, because I have been away and needed to connect to these issues again."

"Yes, Mike, thanks. I will also be leaving soon, because I have an early start tomorrow morning. Goodnight."

Mike left, hoping Adrian had the good sense to at least hold out a bit.

But Adrian did nothing of the sort. As soon as he closed the door, he held her tight and kissed her hard on her lips. She tried to pull away, but he held her firmly.

"No!" when he tried to kiss her again. "No Adrian, you are hurting me!"

"Good! You deserve it!"

She stared wide-eyed at him, hurt by his callous remark. "Adrian, please, let me go. I don't like this mood of yours."

He looked at her and realized from her pained expression that he had gone too far. "Okay, I'm sorry. You make me crazy. Sorry," as he touched her lips gently. He pulled her closer to him and was about to say something when the phone rang. He went to answer it and it was Jack, his political strategist. He spoke to him and watched Frances standing there, where he had left her. He beckoned her to him, but she just glared at him. He raised his eyebrows in a threatening way and she quickly went to him. He held her and gently rubbed her back. He unzipped the back of her dress and touched her all the while talking to Jack. A few minutes later, her dress was lying on the floor and Jack got none of his attention. They went to bed, their lust and anger at each other infused in their passionate lovemaking.

Adrian was caressing her legs at some unreasonable hour in the morning. "Oh, it is so early. Adrian, go back to bed."

“No, I told you I would have an early start today, so relax and let me make love to the woman who tortures me with her disobedience.”

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Adrian was feeling very frustrated. Frances was withdrawing from him and he did not know why. What had happened between last night and tonight? He sensed her tension and could she was not sure what to do about something. He watched her pace up and down on the balcony, her shoulders tight and her body closed in. Should he go to her and extract it from her, or should he leave her alone? She looked really uptight. *Fuck it, I want to know. Anyway, it will be long night if she carries on like this.* He went over to her and hugged her. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, of course. Just getting some fresh air.”

“Are we going to do the polite thing, now? I am not asking you if you are okay as a matter of civility. I am asking you if you are really okay. If you are, I want to know why your body is so tense and what is so awful that you are not sure whether to talk to me about it. That is the question.”

“Okay, relax. No need to be so harsh. I guess I am feeling a little tense. Yes I am fine, but I am angry with myself. Adrian, I heard you are pushing for the Loss and Retention of Membership to the Legislature Bill. I got a little upset about it.”

“Yes. Why?”

“It is morally wrong. I think that kind of legislation is awful in a democracy. People must go to parliament as a member of a Party and stay there. If they don’t like the Party any more, they must just leave Parliament and let someone else do the job. I don’t like it because you are forcing the will of the people. I don’t like it because you guys are using the law to steal politicians.”

“Yes, that’s exactly the point, isn’t it? It is a perfectly legitimate use of the law for more political power. Frances, people have been crossing the floor since the beginning of history. Sometimes, well, you get a good politician and they are in the wrong Party. So, you try to bring them to your Party. It’s a legal way of doing it. I don’t really buy your morality argument. It is a question of politics. If the person is so moralistic about their politics, they won’t cross the floor to another Party.”

“But, Adrian, when people vote, they vote for you in a particular Party, because of what you believe in it. It is wrong and totally unacceptable. It will allow your Party to steal people from the other Parties. It is wrong, wrong, wrong. It annoys me that you want to play such a dirty trick.”

Adrian glared at her. “Frances, I think we must stop this discussion before we get really angry with each other. We do not steal people, we simply allow a process for them to run away from their own Party if they want to. Anyway, your Party can also encourage people to cross to you.”

“That’s the problem with you liberals. You just make the principle to suit your selfish interest. It is all so flexible, isn’t it?”

“Dammit, Frances, you bloody democrats take the word in its narrowest form. You are so rigid and purist that you don’t allow the processes to follow. You think democracy is the goal, when all it is a means to creating a fair society. So don’t you dare tell me that we have selfish interests.”

He kept quiet for a while and they glared at each other. He sighed deeply and went to her.

“Look, I think you and I will never agree on some political issues. That’s fine with me. I accept that, but Frances that is not really the issue here today. This is about us, isn’t it?”

“No, not really. I mean. I suppose we should not discuss this. We will just end up fighting.”

He waited for the rest of it, but she was clearly not going to say anything. *Okay, she wants to be difficult, then so be it.* He waited patiently, staring at her the way he knew she hated so much.

“Okay, what, what about us? Adrian, don’t just stare at me. What are you on about?”

“So, tell me, my dear, why didn’t you just ask me?”

“Look, it does not matter, okay?”

He stared at her again. She moved away from him. *He is doing that staring thing, and I need to get away from him,* she thought.

“Frances, don’t play games with me. I want you to tell me why, when told something about me which clearly bothers you, you don’t simply ask me.”

“What did you want me to say, really, think about it, what should I have said?”

He glared at her. “You should have asked me! You should have told me that it makes you feel angry! You have told me why it bothers you so much! What is the matter with you? Do I need to tell you what to say to me? What is the problem?”

He was breathing heavily, now, glaring at her.

She turned her back on him and tried to go back inside.

“Don’t you dare walk away now!”

She stopped suddenly, a little afraid of his tone. “Don’t shout at me, I am not a child!”

“Really? Your behavior says something else.” He realized that she looked upset, so he said softly, “Frances, please, tell me why you won’t talk to me.”

“Okay, you want to know? I am afraid of you. I am afraid of what you might think of me! I am afraid of what you mean to me and what will happen to us. I am afraid that you will not be able to do normal things with me....I am afraid.... to touch you when I feel like it. I am afraid.....”

“Touch me.”

“What?”

“Touch me. I want you to touch me.”

“Adrian....”

“Touch me.” He just stood there, his body commanding and unyielding. She walked up to me him placed her hand on his chest.

“Is that how you want to touch me?”

He raised his eyebrows at her. “No, I just sometimes want to do this,” as she put her arms around his neck. He pulled her close to him.

“Was it difficult? Painful?”

She laughed. “No.”

“How else?”

She held him around the waist and nestled her head on his shoulder. “And like this when you fight with me.”

“Was it difficult? Painful?”

“No, and like this, when I feel like it,” as she caressed his buttocks.

“Was it difficult? Painful?”

“No, no, no!” as she put her hand on the buckle of his belt. He groaned softly and laughed.

“Frances, I think you had better get over your fear of me because I like your touching every much.”

He murmured as he kissed her. *Tomorrow, I will finish this discussion with her.*

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### Chapter 13

Frances was standing still, her body unable to move, her brain unable to comprehend.

*Charles? Charles? What is the matter with Charles? Why is he lying there so quiet with a small smile on his face? Why is Heather crying like that? Why is she screaming like that?*

*What is wrong?* Frances had just got to the hospital. She had been in a meeting with one of Charles’ friends and they had been joking about what a tough old dog he was. At 68 years old, he was always teased for his hyperactive body and strong, persuasive mind. Frances had just put her cell phone on when it started ringing. She was slightly irritated, because she was hoping to get a small break before going back to the office. *Shit, more work.* It was her secretary Wendy.

“Frances, thank God I found you at last. Charles had a heart attack. He is at the Medical Centre now. He is asking for you. Heather is with him and says he must see you now. Please, go there now. Frances?”

“Yes, okay, yes, shit, I am on my way. Shit!”

She stood at the hospital bed, watching the events. *Something is very wrong. Why is he smiling when he has so many tubes on his body? Is he in pain?*

“Charles? Charles?” She moved towards him and touched his hand. “Charles, are you alright? Charles!”

She realized that both the nurse and Heather had suddenly gone quiet and they were staring at her. “Charles, please, stop playing. I can see you are smiling, so there. Are you alright?”

“Excuse me Miss, please, Minister Hornby is no longer with us. Please.”

“No longer with us? What do you mean? There he is. He is smiling.”

Heather came to her and held her. “Oh Frances, oh Frances. He is dead. He is no longer with us.”

Frances stared at her face, her cheeks stained from crying. *Gosh, it is true! Charles has really died.* But her brain could not comprehend the information fully. “Frances, he tried to wait for you. He wanted to say goodbye, but I think he was too weak.”

“Heather? Are you alright?”

Frances suddenly realized that if Charles was dead, then Heather must be devastated. The women stood there, next to Charles’ body and just hugged each other. Then they cried.

“Oh Frances, I can’t bear it. In the last two years, he was the best thing that ever happened to me. How will I wake up each morning, without his smiling face, teasing me, telling me some stupid joke about politicians? Who will send me flowers when I am angry? How will I sleep at night, knowing he won’t be there to hold me when I have bad dreams? Frances, how will I go on?”

Frances was suddenly fully aware of the woman’s pain and she tried to comfort her. “Oh Heather, he loved you so much. Remember that. Remember everything you shared together. Heather, I don’t know what to say, I don’t know what to feel.”

They sat both sat down and stared at the cold, still body of the man who had meant so much to both of them. Frances was slowly recovering from the shock.

“Heather, I think we must leave now. Come, let me take you home.”

She slowly edged Heather towards the door and with one last glance at him, Heather regained her composure and left the hospital with Frances. They did not talk and Heather did not object to Frances taking her home.

Frances made her a cup of tea and started to phone around. It was awful, having to tell the story over and over. He was at work and had a heart attack in his office. No, nothing had happened. Things had been quiet at work. A few moments later, Johnson’s wife, Megan

was at the door. She and Heather were very good friends and when Heather saw her, she burst out crying again. Before long, most of closest members of the Peoples Democratic Party were crowding the house, each trying to comfort Heather. Amongst them was the Deputy-President, Lavern Hatting. She and Heather had been great friends in their young days. Their parents had been friends and they had grown up together. As women, they told each other all their secrets and had shared deep intimacies about their various lovers. They had tried to maintain their friendship over the years, but had not been able to because of their busy lives.

Lavern was crying so hard, it was Heather who had to comfort her. Heather held her friend close and they whispered comforting words to each other.

“Mike, has anybody told Mike?”

“No, my dear, no. Please ask Frances to do it. He will not take it well from either of us.”

Lavern hesitated for a moment. She was still not convinced that Frances was not after her man. Then she looked at the girl, standing alone at the far end, trying to understand. She looked so lost and dejected that Lavern realized just how much Charles had meant to the girl. He often joked about her, saying she was the daughter he never had, and now, looking at her, she understood the special bond between Charles and the girl. She would never have an affair with his respected colleague and friend. Perhaps it would be best if she told Mike. Lavern could not trust herself to do it. She could not trust herself around him. She went up to Frances.

“Are you alright, my dear?”

“Yes, thank you, Lavern, I am still in shock, that’s all. I can’t seem to think straight. I can’t focus.”

“Yes, it is a very difficult. But we must be strong, okay?”

She touched Frances lightly on her arm. As they stood there, the women felt a familiarity they had never felt before. They were bound together by something, but they did not know what it was.

“Frances, I need a favor, please. We need to tell Mike.... I can’t deal with him now. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes, of course.”

Frances looked into the woman's eyes and felt a strange sense of understanding. She understood what this woman was saying, feeling.

"Are you going to be alright when he comes?"

Lavern stared at the girl. *Does she know?*

"Yes, I am sure I will be. Mike and I are old friends, but sometimes it's harder to deal with our friends than strangers. Thank you for understanding. Charles was right, you are very dear."

"Thank you, but I think I had better phone him. Otherwise he will fight with both of us for not telling him!"

Lavern smiled. *The girl knows Mike well. That is exactly what he would say.* She watched her walk away and wondered why she had felt such a strong jealousy about this woman who, by all accounts, was no threat to her. *It is so strange.*

Frances took her phone and went out to the far end of the garden. She phoned Adrian first, but his phone was off. She left him a short message. "Phone me urgently."

Then she phoned Mike. He was laughing at something that was being said to him and said, "Frances, Adrian was just talking about you. Are you seeking him?"

"No, yes, ur, Mike, I need to talk to you. I have some bad news."

"Frances, are you okay?"

"Yes, but please, I don't know how to say this. Charles died a few moments ago."

There was a long silence and then Adrian spoke, "Frances, what is the matter? Mike looks like he has just seen a ghost."

"Oh Adrian, Charles died. He had a heart attack and it was awful. I don't know what you do."

She was crying now.

"Frances, sweetheart."

"Sorry, I shouldn't be crying. I am at his house and I shouldn't be crying. It will just upset Heather and Lavern. They are trying to be strong, but not doing too well. Adrian?"

"Yes, calm down Frances. Do you want me to come over?"

"Yes, but I think bring Mike with you tell him that Lavern is here."

“Lavern, what are you talking about? Why?”

“Please, just tell him. He will understand.”

“Frances, I am sorry I just left you like that. I .... it is a bit of a shock. I spoke to him this morning, and we had breakfast in my garden here, chatting about the world and laughing about old times. He was telling me about you and how outraged you are about Adrian’s floor-crossing Bill. He was so animated and funny. I just got a shock. Is Heather alright?”

“Yes, I guess. Well, there are lots of people here and she is trying hard to cope. But Lavern will stay the night with her. She arrived just a few moments ago.”

“I see.”

“Mike, can you come over? I feel a little out of my depth here. I don’t really know what to do. Can you?”

After a long silence, Mike said quietly. “Yes, thank you for being there for them Frances. I know that this is not easy for you. I will see in a bit. Bye. Do you want to speak to Adrian?”

“Yes.”

“Hi Again. Frances, are you alright?”

“No.”

“We are coming over and I will take you home, alright?”

“No, yes, but I left Heather’s car at the hospital. I ....”

“Okay, don’t think about it. Send one of Lavern’s bodyguards to get it. I am coming over, okay?”

When she hung up, she looked up and realized that Lavern had been standing outside, watching her. She could not hear what Frances had said, but she saw how the girl almost fell apart. *Charles had relied on her, depended on her and protected her from everything and everyone. She must feel so alone now.*

Frances got up and went to Lavern.

“Mike is a bit shocked. He is coming over.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Lavern, can I ask one of your bodyguards to fetch Heather’s car? I left it at the Hospital. I didn’t want her to drive.”

“Of course, my dear, but you must not worry about such things.”

“I have to, otherwise my brain will explode. Otherwise I am going to completely freak out. I need to focus on something that is not about Charles.”

“Oh Frances. We have sort of left you with the responsibility. Sorry. I...”

“I know that you have known each other a very long time and some bonds just can’t be broken. I know, Lavern, trust me, I understand fully. Please talk to me about something else.”

“Was Mike alright?”

“No, not really. He just sat quietly for a while and then he tried to speak. I think he is going to be a while.”

“Yes, it will be hard on us all. Now, let me send someone for the car. Also, they can get my bags and help me settle in. I want them to go away. Their prying eyes sometimes bother me. Come, help me organize everything. We can go through his diary and phone everyone. I will deal with the press. Is that better?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The two women worked well together and before long, everyone Charles was close to had been contacted. Frances looked out the window, at the string of vehicles, bodyguards and officials crowding the lawn. Politics had been his life and in his death, all his friends and enemies gathered there, not knowing what to do.

~ ~ ~ ~

Adrian walked in the door, followed by Mike. He looked straight at Frances, but said nothing. He went over to Heather and hugged her. He must have told her something funny, because she giggled. Mike was close behind him and he simply held Heather. He said nothing to her and they stood together like that for a while. He turned and looked at Lavern and he smiled slightly.

“Oh Lavern, this is terrible.” He did not touch her. Lavern said nothing. She walked out into the garden and Mike followed her. They were chatting on the lawn.

Adrian went to Frances and sat next to her on the couch. His arms ached to hold her tight, to squeeze all the pain out of her.

“Sweetheart, let’s go home. You are not okay.” He whispered.

“Yes, Please.”

They went to Lavern and Mike in the garden. “Mike, I am taking Frances home. I will use her car. Here are your keys. Is that going to be alright, Lavern?”

“Yes, of course, Adrian. Frances has been very brave today, seeing to everything while Heather and I were falling apart. Please, Frances, try and get some rest. Tomorrow, we will deal with it, okay?” Lavern was smiling at Frances, her green eyes gleaming warmly.

Mike went to Frances and hugged her. “I am so sorry, Frances. I wish I could say something to make it better. I just don’t know what.”

“It’s okay. I don’t know what to say either. Perhaps, later, we will all feel better and talk.”

Heather came out to join them.

“Please, Lavern, I need you. I can’t deal with all these people. Can you host them? I need to take a break.”

She sat down on a bench nearby. Mike went to join her. They sat on the bench and hugged and from a distance they looked like lovers.

“Frances is going home now, Heather. She will be back tomorrow.”

“Oh Frances, you poor thing! Please, sit down here. I need to talk to you before my mind goes dotty on me. Move Mike, I want to talk to Frances.”

Mike got off the seat and Frances sat down. The two men stood around, reluctant to leave.

“It’s okay, you two. Please. Don’t run away. We are all friends here. Frances, I want you to know how hard he tried to hold on. He wanted to see you. He loved you so much. He said to tell you to trust your heart, not your head. He kept saying, ‘tell her to trust her heart’. That it will be okay. He wanted you to know that it would be okay. Frances, do you understand what he was saying?”

“Yes, yes, I do understand. What puzzles me is how he knew so much about everything and everyone.”

“I know. That is what I loved about him. Frances, he was very worried about you. He came home a few days ago, very agitated. He said you were so busy saving the world that you did not even know your own heart. He went on and on about it. Frances, are you okay?”

Frances laughed. “Yes, but he was a nosy old man who should have minded his own business. Oh Heather, there were things I wish I had a chance to tell him. I wanted so much to tell him things, but I always put it off. I regret it so much now.”

“No, don’t, because my dear, he knew. He knew you better than you know yourself.”

“Thank you Heather. You have been so kind. I am going home now. I need to.”

“Yes, tomorrow we will talk more.”

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Adrian and Frances left and many of the people gathered on the lawn watched them walk to her car. Adrian drove and they sat in silence all the way to her house.

“Adrian, where is your car?”

“At work. Frances please, stop worrying about cars! You are not going to work tomorrow. You are staying in bed and I will get my car tomorrow. Now please, leave the cars alone!”

She laughed then, the first time in what seemed like so many hours. They went inside and Adrian fixed her a drink.

“Thank you, Adrian. Thank you.”

Adrian looked at her. She was not dealing with this well. He could tell that she was ready to accept Charles’ death. He was worried about her, the way her eyes were dull and dry. *She doesn’t know what to do with her shattered heart.*

Adrian sat next to her and felt at a loss. What could he do? “Frances, I am worried about you. Are you okay?”

“No, Adrian, I am not alright. I want to die. It hurts so much! I should have told him about us. I wanted to, so many times. I just wish I had told him!” Frances was crying now and Adrian held her. He could think of nothing to say.

After a while, he took her to her bed and made her lie down. She curled up in her bed and lay like a baby. Adrian sat on the edge of the bed, caressing her shoulders and her back. He could not find the words that would make it better, easier for her. Eventually she fell off to sleep and he tucked in her bed. He went to the lounge and had another drink. Adrian felt empty and helpless. He wished so much he could ease her pain. He sat there, sipping many drinks before he went to her bed and climbed in next to her. He held her and she curled her body against him, protecting her from the world.

Adrian woke up the next morning to find Frances still wrapped around him. He tried to move away, but she clung to him, still fast asleep. He looked at the time and it was already eight. He tried to clear his head, but he could feel the alcohol finally taking control of his body. He had drunk so much last night, but had felt sober when he went to bed. Now, he knew he was as drunk as a coot. He eased himself out of the bed and went to his phone.

“Stacy, what do I have this morning?”

“Well, there are two meetings, environmental groups. Are you okay?”

“No, I am not. Can you send someone? Anything later on?”

“A few small things. You have a meeting at 2.00 with Frances Pierce, but her office phoned to say she is not available today, so that’s cleared. Adrian, is there anything wrong? Mike has not come in either. Cheryl says he is not available today.”

“Yes, Stacy, Charles died yesterday and we are trying to help out. If there is anything really urgent, call Mike or I on our cell phones, okay?”

“Okay, I hope everything will be alright.”

“Yes, I am sure it will be.”

Stacy put down the phone, thinking how odd it was that their bosses were acting so weird. Cheryl said Mike sounded awful too. *I mean, the man was the Opposition Party. She shook her head. No one can understand these politicians. Anyway, why is Adrian’s car still in his garage?*

“Mike, are you okay?”

“Hey, Adrian, shit, no. I feel like hell. Is Frances okay?”

“Yes, no, I don’t know. She is still asleep. Is Heather okay?”

“Hmmm well, I think so. Lavern is completely out of control. She was so hysterical last night, I stayed here with them.”

“Shit, imagine that. Charles really affected so many lives. Listen, do you want us to come over later?”

“Yes, if you can. I could do with the company. Plus, I fucked up big time last night. I need a garden talk.”

“Okay, but it will have to be later. I don’t think Frances will be awake for a while.”

“Fine, thanks. Now who is running our offices?”

“Stacy and Cheryl, of course. They seem to have everything under control. I told them to call us if there is a problem. Stacy was very suspicious. She thinks we are up to no good.”

“And she is right! See you later.”

When Frances woke up at about ten, she felt around the bed for Adrian. He was not there, but she could hear the television was on. She got out of bed and went into the lounge.

Adrian was staring at the television blankly, watching a tribute to Charles. He did not hear her come in. She went to him and sat next to him.

“Hello Adrian, I think I overslept a bit.”

He pulled her close to him. “Yes, I think so. Just a little bit,” and smiled.

“How are you feeling?”

“Alright, alright. I was a bit crazy last night, sorry.”

He squeezed her. “Don’t be. What do you need, Frances?”

“I don’t know right now. I feel a little numb. I need to check up on Heather...”

He pulled her back when she tried to get up. “Sit down woman. My head hurts like hell. I have already checked. Mike is there. I said we would go over later. They are going to need a break from all the visitors. Is that okay?”

“Oh yes, Adrian, thank you.”

She kissed his cheek. “Adrian, aren’t you supposed to be at work? Aren’t I supposed to be at work?”

“Oh Frances, please, relax. I think all your appointments are cancelled. I have been informed that you are not available for our meeting today. So, all is cancelled. Now, let me get you some coffee.”

“No, Adrian, let me do it. Why does your head hurt?”

She said as she rubbed his temples. “Because I felt so lost yesterday, I drank too much. I tried to get drunk but felt sober the whole night. Now I am drunk. So, no quick movements, okay?”

“Yes, lord and master. But you need some strong coffee. Now, I am moving slowly towards the kitchen, is that okay?”

Adrian tried to laugh, but his head felt heavy and alive. Frances brought him two pills and a cup of coffee. In a short time, he was feeling better and started to relax. Frances phoned her office and there was no reply. She went to her cell phone to check her messages and received one from Wendy saying that the whole building was closed down for the day and that she had cancelled all her appointments. Johnson had insisted that shut down that day. Frances also relaxed and they eventually made their way to Charles’ house.

~ ~ ~ ~

The house had many people walking in and out and Lavern was chatting to various people Frances did not know. She spoke to all the guests and tried to get some of them to leave, saying that Heather could not deal with everyone. But it was Frances who was not coping. She was feeling sore from the kind words from strangers and friends and she felt like a spoilt child. She wanted Adrian to hold her until all the pain was gone. She did not want to talk to anybody today. She felt the pressures of their secret relationship, because she could not just go to him and have a hug. She looked at him longingly as he sat in the garden having an intense discussion with Mike. They were deep in conversation, oblivious to the many people who came and left the house to pay their respects. Mike, usually a true politician, would greet everyone and chat to them. Today, he was not in the mood. The men stayed out of the house completely. *What are they talking about*, Frances wondered?

Mike looked tired and crushed. Adrian looked at him, wondering what had happened to the man. In the last few days, he had been transformed into a young, excited man. Now, he was back to his dejected, tired self.

“Mike, what happened last night?”

“I don’t know. I just lost control. Adrian, Lavern and I have been having an affair.”

“That Lavern, the Deputy-President, Leader of the PDP? The Opposition?”

“Yes, yes, yes. I have been angry with her for fifteen years, Adrian. Because, you know, when it came down to it, she would not come to me. She chose her political career over us. I have been angry for so long. I have spent fifteen years avoiding her. Can you imagine that? After you and I spoke the last time about Frances, I guess I just remembered how it felt, how I longed for her all those years, how I had avoided functions she would be at, how empty I felt without her. So I called her and we started all over again. It was just sex, lust, matters of the flesh, I told myself.”

“Is that why you have been looking so happy?”

“Yes, I guess so. It is not easy, because she has a husband and bodyguards. I have a wife. So we had an arrangement at her beach house. Frances knows about this, by the way. I think she saw us. I can’t even imagine what she saw. But she definitely knows. She was at her parents on the beach at a time I was there. I guess we were a bit careless, thinking nobody knew us there. Did she tell you, Adrian?”

“No, I don’t think she knows.”

“No, Lavern saw her at the beach. Also, she basically told Lavern. That’s why she told you to tell me that Lavern was here yesterday. She was trying to prepare me.”

“Yes, I thought it was a bit strange. Shit, that woman. She will never learn how to deal with me. She should have told me. I definitely have to deal with her about it. But, let’s get back to the issue of you and the Leader of the Opposition.”

Adrian was smiling now. The idea was a little funny to him, because this was a lot worse than him and Frances.

“Adrian, this is not the time for your jokes. Anyway, it is a bit rich coming from you. You are actually working with your one, so don’t try to make yourself feel better at my expense!”

“Okay, relax. You must admit it is a bit much to comprehend. I mean, it is like a pattern, isn’t it?”

“Yes, we always want the things we shouldn’t have. That is the nature of our personalities, Adrian. We like the challenge, the fight and the ego trip. That’s why we are in politics, isn’t it?”

“Hmmm, but I wish Frances was less of a challenge. I really need something else from her. I need all of her, you know?”

“I understand that. Last night, I really crossed that line with Lavern. She was crying and screaming, telling me it was my fault. Where was I all those years when she needed me, when things were tough, when she had to stand alone? She was completely crazy. I just lost it too. I told her how I loved her and wanted all of her. We just crossed the line and talked intimately, honestly. I really fucked up. I should have left it alone. But I wanted to know why she never just gave up her politics and came to me. She nearly had a heart attack! ‘How dare you, you sexist pig! Why didn’t you give up your life for me? Why was it my responsibility?’ and so on and on. But, you know, at the end of it, I had to admit she was right. Then she just looked at me and said, ‘It is too late. It is far too late. You should have stood by me then. I fight my own battles now.’”

“But Mike, she was just angry. I am sure it will be alright. She will calm down. She is also dealing with Charles’ death. He was very dear to her, I believe.”

“Yes, but the truth of the matter is that it hurt like hell when she said that. It is all true. We will not change our lives now. I will never leave Mina or change Parties now and neither will she. I will never give her the love and support she needed, because she doesn’t need it now. She has become a strong woman on her own terms. I will never really have her now. That is what really killed me inside. We stayed up the whole night talking and I guess, we both knew that we would not be together. It hurts like hell. And I know that I will never recover. I should have left it alone, because then we could have simply pretended it was the lust. Now, the whole Pandora’s Box has been opened and we are both lying on the ground, bleeding to death. It hurts like hell.”

“Oh Mike, what can I do to help?”

“Nothing, just talking about it has helped a lot. I don’t feel so lost anymore. Nothing can be done. We made the choices and there is nothing that we can do. How is Frances?”

“Okay, I guess, listening to you, we are going down the same path. We don’t really talk about things. We treat everything like it is about sex. She won’t tell me anything that is

meaningful. She didn't even tell me about you and Lavern. I don't know. We are going to be like you two in fifteen years time."

Adrian was feeling a little desperate now. The thought of Frances married to another man and having an affair secretly in the dark of the night away from prying eyes really shocked him.

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps you can do things differently. The mistake I made is that I wanted her to come to me. I never imagined that I should go to her. I always assumed it was about me. Last night was the first time I realized it was also about her."

"Well, that is where we differ. I am happy to meet Frances halfway. But she does not trust that it will be okay. I mean, we will always disagree about politics. I can live with that. But for her, it is a sign of something sinister. I can deal with the political crap. I can deal with people talking about us. What I can't deal with is the way she keeps me out there, away from the things that matter to her. She won't let me meet her parents, or her friends and works very hard to shut me out. Even now, she is hurting so much, but she won't turn to me."

The two men sat in silence, consumed by their pain. One man for the pain of the future and the other for the pain of the past.

Lavern was brilliant with all the guests. Many of them just wanted to network and she quickly disposed of most of them. She looked drained and did not smile much. Eventually, she cleared the whole house and instructed her bodyguards to send everyone away. They looked confused, because she was usually very gracious. But then, in the last few days, she had told them that she needed to be alone and had left them at her townhouse on many occasions. *Perhaps it is difficult to have people watching you all the time*, they thought. *But most of the time, she is nice to everyone.*

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## Chapter 14

Adrian thought he had arrived a little early for the funeral. He was very worried about Frances. She had cried uncontrollably again last night and he knew that the shock of seeing Charles lying there in his coffin would tear her heart to shreds. He hated feeling so helpless and having to leave her to come with Heather and Lavern. He wanted her close to him so he could hold her and comfort her. But when he walked inside the large church, he noticed how the politicians were already seated. His Party filled most of the rows on one side of the church and Charles's people sat in the opposite rows. Adrian walked to Mike and sat next to him.

"Gosh, I thought I was early."

"Yes, me too, but it seems there is a morbid fascination with a politician's demise. Look, Adrian, how everyone collects in their groups. Look how they are assessing everyone. This has given them an excuse to be dressed up and be seen. Shit, this will be us one day, do you realize that?"

"Yes, I know. It is very sad. This is where we will all end up. A room filled with a bunch of curious people trying to find out who came to our funeral. Shit, I must say though, there is no shortage of celebrities here today. Charles would have been proud."

"I doubt that. I think he would have preferred a small private thing with his three special women only. But his Party was not losing an opportunity to gain some sympathetic support."

"Hmmm."

"How is Frances?"

"Not too good. A little flaky, I would say. I hope she is alright today. Lavern?"

"Much better. She is in control again."

The men were silent as the three woman walked in. The silence in the church was frightening and the only movement that could be detected was the rays of sun that danced through the high, stained windows. Adrian looked at her as she passed him. Her face was still and lifeless. How he wanted to hold her now. It hurt him so much that he wondered if he should just go to her and take her away from here. Take her somewhere quiet and beautiful so he could make her laugh. But his thoughts were interrupted by Mike.

“Charles was a very special man. Look at the three most remarkable women we know. Look how he always knew that about them and nurtured them. Look at them, devastated by the death of a special man.”

“Yes, they look dramatic in their sadness. Lavern insisted they all wear black because the press would make an issue of they didn’t. Well, it worked. They look as sad and as helpless as can be. Mike, I hope Frances is okay. This morning she kept saying she could go through with it and that she couldn’t do it.”

“She is fine. She will cope. She is a strong woman.”

The women were sitting down now and a tall man came to them and whispered something. He led them to the coffin and they stood looking at Charles’ cold, smiling face.

Adrian was angry. *Why do people have to see the dead body? Jees, wasn’t it enough that they knew he was dead? Frances looks awful.* She just stared at him and looked a little confused. *Is she finally realizing he is dead?* She frowned more and Adrian’s heart started beating fast. *Shit! She is not alright. Shit!* But she walked calmly to her seat and he breathed a sigh of relief. But she turned and looked at him, her eyes wide and questioning. *What is she thinking?*

But Frances was not thinking. Her heart felt heavy and sore and she wanted to pick it out of her chest and place it on a table. It hurt too much to see Charles gone. She stood there looking at him, trying to say goodbye. But he just kept smiling. She thought he said something to her, but she was not sure. She heard it again, the faint whisper of his voice in her heart. “Frances, follow your heart, please, do not think.” Frances felt a soaring pain. *Oh Charles, she thought, you always looked after me, even now. Oh Charles, what can I do?* She asked him. But the voice was gone and she knew it was goodbye. She felt her knees weak and tired. *I want to put my heart on that chair, so I can rest. I want to rest.* Her heart sank and the pain would never go away. *Charles, I will spend the rest of my life in pain missing you. Who will protect me, worry about and drive me crazy? Oh Charles, oh Charles. Will you see what a great job we are doing on the project? Will you smile down at us?*

She bowed down her head and it felt heavy and lost. *I want to sleep now. I want to just shut down until it is over.* She closed her eyes for a while, hoping it would go away. But her mind heard the hushed voices around her. All of them were strangers, talking in pain

and wonderment at the death of a great man. *They are all strangers. I am also a stranger here because nobody belongs at Charles' funeral.*

She opened her eyes and tried to focus. *This is a funeral. Okay, okay.*

She took a deep breath and tried to release the pain into the warm sunny air. She sighed. *Adrian? Where are you?* She looked around and there he was. He was staring at her in absolute fear. He was so worried about her. She saw it in his eyes, the way they looked large and dark. She wanted him to hold her now, so she could rest. She needed to rest. She got up from her seat in the church and walked to him. She moved slowly across the floor until she reached him. She looked at him, his eyes wide with concern and put her arms around him. Adrian was so shocked, he stood there for a while and then he held her. He held her so tightly he thought he would hurt her. She started crying then and he simply held her.

There was a great rush of whisper in the large church. Those who could not see what was going on were hoping to be told.

Adrian's heart was filled with love for her, despair for her pain and a desperate urge never to let her go. She had come to him. He could not stifle the perverse joy that also threatened to engulf him. She had simply come to him, not thinking, but needing him. He wanted to shout out loud in the church "Frances, I love you." He wanted to take her away, but he simply stood there holding her.

Heather smiled as she watched them. Frances had finally taken Charles' advice, even though it had been induced by his death. *Oh Charles, you were so right about those two. Goodbye, my friend and lover. I will always miss you. Goodbye.*

Lavern was also staring at Frances and Adrian. But she did not smile. She cried. She finally realized why she had always felt a tinge of jealousy for this woman. She had seen that, at the end of the day, she had the courage and strength she would never have. She had been brave enough to do what she really needed. Lavern cried hard for the years that she had lost with Mike because she had never been brave enough to break the Party ranks and go to the man she would always love. She cried because it was too late and she knew all she would ever have with him now would be sex at the beach cottage and an occasional

weekend, if they were lucky. She cried for Charles and Mike and Heather. They had lost so much.

Mike was sitting so close to Adrian and Frances that he could swear he could feel their love flowing over him. *Shit! This is a fine time to do this! Every member of the press is here and every single politician of stature. I envy these young people with their brave love and free spirits.* He looked at Lavern crying and tears rolled down his eyes as he realized that she was crying for the two of them and the years they had lost.

He looked at Adrian, tears in his eyes, holding on to her so tightly. He had finally got what he wanted. It had taken Charles' death to bind them together.

But he also marveled at the irony of the situation. Frances, the strongest opponent of floor-crossing legislation, had calmly crossed the floor today, in full view of everyone. She had crossed the floor, emotionally, bravely and had crossed from Adrian's forbidden peach to his beloved woman.

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### About the author

Senna Fisher is a romantic fiction writer from Durban, South Africa. She has an affinity to things magical and spiritual matters. She is also interested in the power dynamics between women and men in a modern society. She loves to observe the world in nature and its connection to human experiences.

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