



THE JOZIE SERIES

the
Ex-
Factor

suzanne jefferies

THE EX-FACTOR

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SUZANNE JEFFERIES



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MADGE

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“What’s not to like? Wait till you get on and we have a spin back to yours. Morningside, right?”

Not on your life, buster - talk about the ongoing saga of the date from hell. Jacques stood next to his beast of a bike, his brown eyes running their gaze over its metallic curves. “You have to admit she’s a beauty. C’mon, let your hair down.”

I didn’t smile. “It might have escaped your attention, but I’m in a skirt.”

At that comment, Jacques’s gaze trailed up my bare legs, before wandering back up to my eyes. Damn, something about that look just felt too...What Madge? C’mon what? Bad boy. Yeah, that was it. And there was no way I was making space for a walking hormone encounter, not even one with hot eyes, broad shoulders, and an infectious grin that warmed those hot eyes even more.

Jacques’ easy grin split wide. “You can ride side-saddle.” *Ride.* What — there were no other words he could’ve used? His hands stroked over the seat, unlocking just the kind of ridey thoughts I was trying to escape. Beautiful, strong, and rough hands that shaped wood, that...*Don’t look at those hands.*

Making sure I tilted my head down at just the right angle of schoolmarm meets probation officer – where were my glasses when I

needed them? – I reached for my cell phone. “I’ll have to make another plan then.”

“I won’t go fast. And I did promise your sister I’d have you home safely.”

I conjured up the picture: him inside my home at the dining table, on the sofa, or in my bedroom? No, nope, not in this lifetime. *Thank you, Charlie for setting up this flame-grilled disaster.* The man had no style. A bike? A *bike*? Did I look like the type of girl who rode on a bike? And on a first date? When he’d said he’d give me a lift home – Charlie’d dropped me off — I’d assumed he meant a car. That he’d agreed to meet me and not fetch me was bad enough — what kind of a man didn’t fetch his date? The kind that doesn’t want a second date, that’s what.

And now, the bike ride home. I dialed Charlie’s number.

“It’s not that bad. Just wrap your arms round me and I’ll look after you.” I concentrated on the dial tone in my ear and let his little suggestion crash and burn.

Charlie’s voicemail greeted me. “Damn it.” Was that the moon winking? Damn it all to hell. Just me, the moon, and the man with the bike. Fab-u-lous.

He held out a helmet. What was the point of spending the afternoon at the hairdresser if helmet head was the result? I’d send him the bill. Not that he’d pay for it. Hadn’t he suggested going Dutch? On a first date? I could have choked on my lobster, only it wasn’t lobster, it was hamburger. Sure, it was okay, but couldn’t he have chosen somewhere a bit more...expensive? No, that wasn’t the word. Exclusive, maybe? Didn’t this guy know anything about the old ‘wine and dine’?

With reluctance, I rammed on the helmet. Up next in the long line of tonight’s challenges – how was I supposed to get on?

“Just sit here, like this.” Jacques straddled the bike.

He reached toward me, his hand outstretched.

I shuffled towards him. “Watch the hands.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

There was no getting around it. I swung my leg over, my skirt riding up which I hastily pulled back down. No-one eyeballed my scars, not if I could help it. I was so close to him, I was practically wedged against him, me and my lack of skirt. I gulped.

“Put your arms round my waist.”

And he had to be in a leather jacket. Yes, it now hid that hideous Iron Maiden shirt — whoever they were — but that worn leather smelt so manly, so clichéd. *Yeah right, tell that to those hormones that feel as if they'd been kick started with a flamethrower.*

I gripped the jacket but just at the edges. I wasn't about to give him ideas about my level of interest which, for the record, was nil. *Put your arms round my waist.* I bet he said that to all the girls.

The bike bucked as he revved the engine. This wasn't too bad. Noisy, yes, but not what I'd expected. Not too bad, at all.

Ambling along, Jacques pulled up to the red light leading out of the parking lot. Thank God, there'd been no-one I knew at Cresta shopping mall. A shopping mall? Couldn't he have sprung for drinks at The Office, the hottest trendiest wine bar in town? Or maybe the Hyde Park hotel's new restaurant that had that fancy TV guy's name above the door? But a run-of-the-mill mall? Seriously? This was the absolute last time I'd veer away from my tried and trusted investment banker dates. They ordered champagne, they complimented me, and they plied me with roses. Not so much as an after-dinner mint here.

The bike idled as he waited for the green light. This bike thing would be okay, right? Bit like a bicycle, only louder, and with heavier helmets?

Then the light changed.

Flung forward, my hands dropped down round Jacques's waist and wrapped round him for dear life. Hol-y. Shit. The wind brushed gooseflesh up my bare legs. This was going slow? Christ, I hadn't been on rollercoasters that moved this fast. *Ohmyachingnerves.* The road was right there, whizzing past. Nothing around me — no metal, no dashboard, nothing — just the flesh of first date Jacques.

A ringing sound screamed through my ears. Was this what imminent death felt like? Holy hell, my heart back-flipped in my mouth, my hamburger meal pretty close behind.

I scrunched my eyes closed which was way worse. How many corners were we going to take? Did he know that the bike tilted that far to the side? I could've reached my hand out and sandpapered myself with the tar.

I inched closer to Jacques. If I could meld with him, I would. Lack of skirt be damned, what I wouldn't do to have more of myself clinging onto him rather than this death trap. And it was freezing. The only heat lay trapped between our bodies, not a thought I wanted to linger on for too long.

He could forget about another date. Just forget it.

JACQUES

Did she realize she was screaming at banshee levels in my ear?

Ahead, the lights started to turn red. But, if I floored it? Easy. I accelerated and

quick-as-a-flash, her grip tightened round me. The bike just caught the green. C'mon, that wasn't really fair was it? Besides, it wasn't like I'd gone over the speed limit. Still. Madge didn't seem the type who'd ever get near a motorbike again. Not in this lifetime. Not unless it was to collect something from a delivery man, and even then she'd probably get someone else to deal. Her type didn't like to get their hands dirty. Oh, I knew what she was expecting alright. Wining and dining and roses and candlelight. Well, news flash, I did *not* do canned romance or canned expectations.

Cute though. *More than cute, and you know it.* Okay, so she was beautiful. So were any number of women I knew. All I had to do was head to the Green and Gold on a Saturday night, and there'd be more than enough beautiful and available women, who'd be more than happy to take a walk on the wild side with me. Not arrogant, just a fact. Yeah? So what was it about this one that scratched under the skin? Madge looked so damn well-kept — polished, waxed, buffed and toned — and she smelt hot like cinnamon sticks, a lethal combination. Everything about her screamed 'don't touch'. Hey, I respected the lady's wishes. But but but...I'd promised Charlie I'd see her home and long story short, it

was the bike or she could Uber. Aha, but she hadn't even suggested Uber or a cab or a bus or an anything. Well, no-one could accuse me of shrinking from a challenge.

Damn it. Red light. I brought the bike to a stop. "You okay back there? Hanging on?"

A small voice. "Can't you go a bit slower?"

Okay, I'd had my fun, time to take it down a notch or three.

At a more respectable pace, I headed up through road after road of tree-lined suburbs. Morningside felt like the other end of the world. Women like Madge simply didn't head west, or east, or heaven forbid south, of their northern suburbs' hunting ground. I'd bet an even hundred, she hung out at Parkhurst doing brunch on Sundays, and thought that movies at Hyde Park equaled culture. Come to think of it, why had she even agreed to a date? Everything about her had looked out of place. From her clothes, to her hair, to her accent. She'd even asked the waiter for gluten-free? The what?

Yet, she'd agreed to meet at the shopping mall? Must have been slumming it.

And she'd said yes to the bike. *Int-er-es-ting*. What was that they said about still waters?

The Lego-looking townhouse complexes stacked up in front of us.

A muffled yell from behind as we neared a particularly large entrance. Must be that one then. Typical faux-Tuscan. What was the name? Villa Margolis? *Yirre*.

I pulled the bike up outside the iron gates. Would she let me in or want me to leave her here?

The gates parted.

In-ter-es-ting.

How long would it take for her to dump the helmet, and vanish to the safety of her little box house? Ten seconds, thirty?

I cut the engine, propped the bike up, and unstrapped my helmet, ready to help her back to her feet.

Madge stumbled off. *Would you look at those legs?* Long, shapely, and quivering in her high-heeled sandals as she battled to get her helmet off. No question about it - this Little Miss Prim had me revved.

She thwacked my helmet into my chest. "Were you trying to kill me? You said you'd go slow."

Her hair fell every which way to Friday. Sexy. Much sexier than that poker-straight vibe she'd rocked earlier. Waves of caramel framed her face, warmed her amber eyes, and caressed her flushed cheeks.

With exaggerated determination, she pulled her skirt back down to a more respectable level. *Talk about spoiling the show.* Still, she hadn't quite moved off as quickly as I'd betted. She hadn't moved off at all. If anything, she was waiting. What for? Somehow, I doubted she'd be up for a long kiss goodnight and I wasn't about to push the possibility.

An awkward silence hung between us.

I bowed slightly. "Nice to meet you, Madge."

She stuck out a hand. "Well, Jacques. It was nice to meet you."

I looked down at the hand and back at her. A handshake? Really? Any second now she'd be calling me a 'gentleman'. Maybe I wasn't wrong about that goodnight kiss?

Taking her hand, I flipped it round, feeling her soft fingers beneath mine. Slowly, I brought my lips down onto her cool smooth flesh, kissing the back of her hand. "It was lovely to meet you too."

A pause. Very int-er-es-ting.

I let go of her hand. She still hadn't moved. It would be so easy to just pull her towards me and kiss her.

She looked from me to the bike. "I hope you get home safely."

Yep, she still wasn't moving.

I connected her helmet to the seat. "Ah, on this thing? Safest thing on the road. Now BMW drivers, those you have to watch out for." Pretty sure she'd been in many of those with all of her upmarket suburbs boyfriends.

"Still you have to be careful..."

I winked at her. "I'm pretty sure I'll survive."

She watched as I reattached my helmet and started up the engine. Even as I turned to head back out of those iron gates, she still stood there in the parking lot.

Interesting indeed.

MADGE

He turned out back onto the road. The roar of his bike semi-convincing me that perhaps he had gone a little slower for me. Jacques de Villiers - not slow enough on the road, not fast enough off it.

The nerve of the man. He hadn't even tried to kiss me. Not that I would have let him, necessarily. I'd already rehearsed the possible reactions to any attempt at a lunge: *What do you think you're doing?* in suitably icy tones as I moved away in distaste, a gasp of pure horror perhaps, maybe even a hand over my mouth and a shaking head. Was it still okay to slap a guy? Probably not, and he was friends with Charlie, so definitely not up there in the good idea handbook.

But he hadn't even *tried* so much as an attempt at a proper kiss goodnight.

As for the kiss to my hand, how quaint, and old-fashioned, even. Corny, that's what it was. Why couldn't he have just shaken my hand and be done with it like a real gentleman would've done?

There was still a slight trace of his aftershave, warm and spicy, that lingered on my hand. A hand which felt soft and smooth with beautiful tips courtesy of Dream Nails. The hair - it had to be my hair. That helmet had wrecked my chances, no-one wanted hair that looked unkempt. Damn him and that stupid bike.

I checked my watch. Only ten fifteen. Early. Who finished a first date at ten fifteen even if it was a school night? Weren't you supposed to be

up all night talking or something? I should've invited him in for coffee. No. Too soon.

What was I even talking about? There was no way I wanted to be subjected to a date with that man again. Where would he choose next? Somewhere like the McDonald's drive through? And if I was really lucky, he might bring along a box of red wine, so that we could sip it in the parking lot while we inhaled exhaust fumes and listened to the screeches of hyperactive kiddies fighting for their turn on the jungle gym.

Bugger you, Jacques de Villiers, you're so not my type anyway.

I let myself into the townhouse. The kitchen light still beamed, waiting for my return. One by one, I kicked off my shoes, switched on the kettle, and slammed the door behind me. What was I going to say to Charlie? *I think your friend was well, definitely good looking, but not quite my type?* After all the times Charlie had listened to me talk about wanting to go out with a different kind of guy? Wasn't that the whole point? What did sisters know anyway? Nothing, as it turns out.

It had been how long now since Mike? A month or so. Maybe it was too soon to be out there again. I'd liked Mike a lot. And we'd dated for a solid eight months or so, and then he'd upped and vanished, like they all did. I'd been so sure Mike was different. Well, he hadn't been. First sniff of commitment and he was out the door. Heck, he'd even come up with excuses not to see me on *weekends*. I should have been glad to have been rid of him.

But I wasn't.

I was headed for the wrong side of thirty with no stable relationship in my past, not a one. Not that I mentioned this much on first dates. Who hadn't had some near miss engagement in their past? Or the serious varsity boyfriend who decided to flee to London as soon as he had his degree? Me, that was who. Mike had looked set to break my record of relationship expiry. Couldn't he have just waited one more month? Then at least I could say that my longest relationship had been nine months -

almost an entire person.

But I'd *liked* Mike. He was so everything I wanted in a man: educated, employed, ambitious, going places and cute. Sure, the sex hadn't been all that, but that wasn't the most important thing in a relationship, was it?

What would sex with Jacques be like? A delicious fizz erupted somewhere in my nether regions. *Yeah, maybe don't think about that.*

So not my type, not even vaguely. What had Charlie been thinking? What had *I* been thinking? Northern suburbs girls didn't go out with boys from Roodepoort or wherever it was he was from. The two did not mix, end of.

This was why birds of a feather flocked together and so on and so forth, because really you could take that guy out of the West Rand, but you couldn't take the West Rand out of the guy.

I poured a mug of herbal tea (rose vanilla) and padded through my open plan living space towards the stairs. My couches sat to attention, the cushions puffed out, the throws artfully draped across the back, and in the center of the coffee table, a vase of Proteas stood ramrod straight, with a stack of magazines lined up next to the vase. Not so much as a speck of dust had three seconds to settle in here - good. To think that I managed to maintain all of this perfection with a full-time job organizing listed companies' communications. Lesser mortals would cringe at the very thought.

The only thing missing? My partnership. A little something I'd been working my ass off for and then some.

I made my way up to the bedroom, at the top of the stairs.

And how would Jacques fit in with my hectic, on-the-go life? Answer: he wouldn't. Sure, I could meet him for dates *now*, but once that partnership was mine, it was bye bye to any *rendezvous* at the local take-out.

Partner's partners needed to fit in. To hover in the background, a stable support of bland. Bland? No. *Safe*. Someone who knew what was what. Someone who wore suits, ties, and had an office job.

My bed had been made since first thing that morning, a self-help book lay on the nightstand, and a pair of jeans tucked over a dumb valet. I'd have to tidy those jeans away in the morning. I put down the tea, and carefully undressed, settling into a pair of pink satin pajamas which were too hot in summer, but just perfect for spring.

What would he think of my choice of nightwear? A small shiver. Then a voice: *Why was I even thinking about him?*

Exactly.

Life was perfect. As soon as I snagged that partnership, I'd be set. Perfect job, perfect home, everything exactly where it should be.

Oh, my shoes—I'd left them downstairs. My satin pj's swished against me as I made my way back to the abandoned shoes. Shit. I grasped the bannister as I descended my staircase. Sometimes, this happened. My broken-apart-and-put-back-together left leg would protest and box me from the inside out. Hobbling about like a Star Wars droid, I retrieved my shoes. Seeing them lying there reminded me of how excited I'd been only a few hours before. Okay, not that excited, it was a blind date after all, but there was so much promise there. He could have been Prince Charming. Well, a girl could dream, right? Though, how many dates did I have to go on and how many starter relationships did I have to plough through before anyone with even the bleakest prospect of Prince Charming appeared?

Still, who dreamt of Miss Hobble Hobble from Hobbleton with her dodge-a-rama leg?

I headed back upstairs to the bedroom, and opened the closet, selecting the box for those particular stilettos. Sleek heels, slightly rounded toe, and glistening in color, Jacques could have appreciated my attention to detail a little more. One by one, I placed the shoes into their tissue paper, and then replaced the box alongside the rest of my shoe collection.

In the back corner, more or less covered by the skirts of a full-length ball gown, sat my ice skates, all shiny white, with the blade snuggled into

its protective lumo orange skin. I stared at them a long time. What I needed was to get back out there, do a couple of bum slides and be back in the game. Prove to myself that I could, I would, and I will. My leg twitched. Instead, I closed the closet and climbed back into bed.

Prr-ing.

A What's App message—no doubt Charlie, who would be checking in and hoping to score on all the good gossip. Well, not this time, sister.

JCQ: how about next time we take it slow and head out to watch the eagles

Him. He'd texted. I checked my watch. He'd texted within about thirty minutes of saying goodbye. That was a good sign, wasn't it? Too keen maybe? Yes, *definitely* too keen. Tomorrow would have been better. Wait, why had he texted me? How could he think we'd actually be going on another date? After tonight, no thanks bud. The smell of engine oil, leather and him still lingered, sending a heatwave through me. Damn those hormones! Maybe one more date? No, no, definitely not, where could this relationship go, heck, would there even be a relationship? What was I thinking? Maybe a few nights with him? Yes. Yes. That sounded more do-able. Just fast — no, *slow* — hot sex. I swallowed at my body's traitorous reaction to just the thought of sex with him. Really, the libido had no inkling of taste. Could I imagine him at the polo event coming up? Disaster. Him and his *bike*.

But a good old-fashioned, no strings attached fling? Clearly, I wasn't built for relationships, but a fling I could definitely handle. *Partnership, Everson, partnership, eye on the prize.*

I looked at my phone screen until it locked. Ten minutes was a good time to wait between replies, right? Not to let him think that I was waiting for his text. Oh, wasn't I? No, definitely not. Still, that smile. When Jacques smiled, which had been about four times the whole night, it reached his eyes, lighting up his whole face. Just thinking about it made me smile. A gorgeous smile—a ten for sure—but a smile didn't tick all the other boxes I was looking for.

I started texting.

Madge Everson: Are you kidding? Why would I want to watch that old band?

JCQ: ?? black eagles botanical gardens birds

A park? The only good thing about that was I had no chance of running into someone I might actually know. And what was with the horrible texting? Grammar, dude.

Madge Everson: When?

Pause. Long pause. Again, the screen locked. Damn it. I should have just said *yes, let's go look at birds or seventies rock bands, whatever*, instead of answering with a question. Guys hated that, didn't they? Even ones who ignored the period, comma, and capital letter functions.

I took a sip of my tea, then another. Forget him. He was just another typical guy, out for what he could get, and then he'd be gone, on that bike, into the past, a bad memory. Fling remember? Who cared what he thought of my responses?

JCQ: Sunday?

There it was – a question mark. Ten extra points. Today was Wednesday. Free on Sunday. And Friday and Saturday, not that he needed to know that. Sunday was far enough away.

But he really wasn't my type, definitely not my type, and fling or not, this needed to be nipped in the bud now.

Madge Everson: Busy in the morning. Super hectic weekend. Maybe an hour tops. Will have to let you know.

JCQ: kay

A pause. What should I say now?

Madge Everson: Thank you for dinner. And for the lift.

JCQ: you're welcome sleep well

Madge Everson: You too.

No kisses, no emoticons blowing hearts or kisses or anything like that. Well, I had blown him off. It was the right thing to do? Absolutely. And he'd guessed the correct 'you're', but bombed again on the lack of discernible punctuation.

I finished my tea, went to brush my teeth, then came back to bed. Yes, I checked the phone – no new messages.

Sunday. Maybe I *should* go. A lover, that's what I needed, a man to service my needs, then be gone back into the night. Who better than this man from the wrong side of town who rode bikes, wore heavy metal band t-shirts, and didn't do brunch?

I pulled on my sleeping mask. I'd sleep on it.

But as sleep evaded me, all I could think of was the reassuring comfort of Jacques's body against mine.

MADGE

Thursday morning, I arrived at work at eight in my role of Team Director, Capitol Hill Investor Relations. Not that I started work then, ohno. Since six that morning, I'd already been awake, scouring the press for any potential negative stories about my clients, any industry stories, anything my clients might need to know. Before seven, I'd already sent off twenty emails, and fielded one phone call, and that's fewer than my 'normal' mornings.

Worse still, were the never-ending thoughts of Jacques de Villiers which intruded into my busy, busy—did I mention busy?—routine. What would Jacques know about the daily rigors of working in a field like Investor Relations? Bet he didn't even know how the stock exchange worked. Not that being a carpenter was a bad thing, but it didn't exactly rock the financial world, did it?

If I dated him, I'd end up taking him out all the time. Carpenters couldn't make that much money, could they? I had no problem with fifty fifty, but which of my dates had been the one to do a disappearing act because I earned more money than him? Four good months down the drain. And he had an office job, too.

My umpteenth cup of coffee in hand, I ran my eye down my list of meetings for the day. Ten am, new client meeting, organized by my colleague, Nomfundo. I frowned. When did that request get sent? I opened up the appointment. No details.

“Nom?” I called out. “Who’s the meeting with? Need to do some prep reading.”

Nomfundo looked up from her desk, her hair falling in wild braids. “Private equity client wants to keep things hush.”

“Ja, but who?”

“I’ve got his name somewhere.” She searched the paper piles on her desk. “Richard someone or other. De Villiers, I think.”

“The food company guy?”

“Yep, him.”

“I remember him. What do you need from me? I’ve got that media training thing later.”

Nomfundo waved her hands about. “Just the usual pitch mumbo jumbo.”

“No prob.”

Shit. Another thing to add to the ever-growing to-do list. What I needed was a holiday. What? With the partnership possibility looming? Who had the time? Not me, that was for sure.

Still, my thoughts drifted to me, a lover—who looked suspiciously like Jacques—a deserted beach, a burning sun, a couple of sci-fi books beside me.

Reality thudded. It was October with no leave in sight for a good few months. No lover either. Well, not yet, but *maybe*.

We would have to make our *rendezvous* at mine. Men like Jacques probably lived in a caravan or some sort of squishy little apartment that smelled of dried up vomit and whisky. Meeting at mine was okay by me. It meant that he didn’t have to drive me anywhere, and that suited me just fine. Didn’t he realize how risky motorcycles were? He might like to live on the edge but I was quite happy playing it safe in the middle. Safe equaled bones that didn’t break, hearts that didn’t break, in fact, nothing that broke.

My phone pinged.

CharlieT: How’d the date with Jacques go?

I would not dignify the question with an immediate response. Let her stew a bit. Just because she was all happily loved up with Brian, she assumed that I needed to be as well. What did Charlie know?

Another ping.

CharlieT: ?

My fingers flew across the screen

Madge Everson: So NOT my type. Don't want to talk about it.

I hit 'send'.

Ping.

CharlieT: Really? My bad. Want to go ice skating later?

Madge Everson: It's a school day.

CharlieT: Bunk

Madge Everson: Hahaha. Ve-ree fun-nee.

CharlieT: Seriously though, let's go skating, it's been a-g-e-s.

Madge Everson: Have work to do. Sorry

Charlie T: You're just scared you're going to fall like last time.

Madge Everson: Have LOTS of work to do. Speak later.

Charlie T: See you at the parents' tonight.

Madge Everson: Joy and rapture. Questions is, which is which?

I tossed my phone onto the pile of 'to-do' on my desk. Ice skating? Ice skating? Last time I'd headed out to Northgate rink, my butt had not so much kissed the ice as full-on crashed towards it, landing me in the casualty ward with suspected bleeding on the brain and my one-way trip to Bionic Woman. Um. No, thank you. Had Charlie developed some sort of early morning vodka habit? Setting me up with Grade-A losers, well, maybe not entirely loser-ish, and then suggesting hookey playing jaunts to the rink? Was early thirties too early for Charlie to be displaying signs of dementia?

I worked through my inbox that bulged with client queries. I executed the ones that needed looking at, and trashed the jokes, the chain mails, and the spam. My inbox gave the hydra a run for its money; with every email dealt with, another four would spring up in its place.

“Ready for the meeting?” Nomfundo waited, notes and pen in hand.

That was quick. Where did the time go? “I’ll be right there.”

I picked up the pin-striped jacket that always sat on the back of my chair, put it on, folded down the collar, then twisted my hair into a knot. Ready. Time to knock this one out the park. We were still a few hundred thousand short of our billing target for the year. A decent PE transaction could get us there.

Or rather, could get *me* there, and with it the partnership.

My high heels sunk into the carpet as I opened the boardroom door.

Nomfundo stood next to a tall man somewhere in his mid-sixties, alongside the boardroom table. A good looking man in an older man kind of way. Great smile.

“Richard de Villiers, nice to see you again.” I made my way round the table. “I haven’t seen you since that staff equity transaction a few years back.”

He took my proffered hand and slowly shook. “That’s right. You worked with Roger?”

“Fred.”

“That’s right. Is he still here?”

“Long gone I’m afraid.” I turned the pitch to Nomfundo. “What can Capitol Hill help you with?”

Richard leaned back in his chair, his beer belly poking through the gaps between his shirt buttons. “Actually, if you don’t mind, I just want to wait for my son.”

“Your son?”

“*Ja*, it’s his company actually. JVD. Might have heard of it? They like to fly under the publicity radar. Here he is now.”

I remained seated. Was this some kind of a joke? There was Jacques. In a suit. Well, not a *suit* suit, but pants and an open-collared shirt. Round his neck was what looked like a shark’s tooth. Ohmy. Just his presence in the room was enough to get my hormones racing on overdrive. Any second now, his musky smell would knock out my senses

and the way that shirt clung to the broadness of his shoulders... that pulse of desire throbbed. *No, no, not now.*

What the hell was he doing here?

A flurry of hellos, nice to meet yous, and handshakes. He paused as he reached me. He didn't offer a hand, neither did I. Shock still had me rooted to the spot. This must be some sort of *Punk'd* show, right? Any second now, some celebrity would pop up and we'd all have a good laugh, and then I could resume my normal, ordinary life.

"Good to see you again, Madge." All business.

He sat down next to his father. Now I could see the resemblance. Sort of. Both dark, both tall, with, let's face it, the matching surname that should've given him away. But I just didn't connect the two. Around these parts, it's a common enough name.

"Let me tell you a bit about my company." He settled back into his chair, slouching almost.

Cresta! He'd taken me to *Cresta*. A shopping mall! To a non-descript crappy little steakhouse that used ready-made custard. Cheap bastard.

I found my voice. "Tell us all about JVD, that's its name right? Let me guess, you deal in furniture?"

Richard looked impressed. "Seems someone's done her homework. That's not common knowledge exactly—"

Jacques interrupted. "I develop custom pieces as a sideline. Not strictly part of JVD. And since you asked, we're a small private equity company, specializing in family-led small and medium sized businesses that are looking to expand."

"And you get involved personally with these businesses?" I noted the sharpness in my voice.

Jacques shrugged. "We give them the expertise they need to expand, enter into different markets. Hands-on is always better."

He looked directly at me. Warm eyes that challenged me. Hands on, indeed. Just the way the words shaped in his mouth had those NSFW thoughts flowing. I swallowed, then looked away. Was that the room

getting smaller round me, or was it just my overactive imagination?

I was not really here, this wasn't really happening. How could he sit opposite me for an entire dinner and not mention what he actually did for a living? Liar, that's what. Why didn't Charlie say anything? And to think he'd let me prattle on and on about difficult clients, and he'd known all along that he was coming here this morning. He could forget Sunday and eagles and my half-formed fantasies about my poor carpenter stud-lover.

Nomfundo made notes. "From what I gather, there hasn't been much publicity as yet, but I'm assuming there's some sort of announcement you want to make?"

"Correct. And I'd like you to handle it." Although I studied the boardroom table's intricate woodgrain, I didn't have to look up to know that Jacques meant me.

"We'd be delighted to assist. Did you have an approach in mind?"

Jacques launched into detail. I doodled my pen across my notebook. *Sorry, Nomfundo but this one is all yours.* No way in hell was there going to be any dealing of any kind with this client.

Jacques continued: "A site visit. If you're interested."

I didn't respond. Nomfundo nudged me under the desk. "We'd be delighted."

When the time came for said site visit, Nomfundo would be doing the traipsing. I could forget hitting my target with this client. I'd find some new business elsewhere. Come to think of it...

"Richard, anything we can help you with?"

He shook his head. "Not at the moment. Our in-house team are working out well. Thanks for that training, by the way."

"Only a pleasure." Shit, seems I'd done my job *too* well there.

"I'm sure it was," Jacques smiled at me. "A pleasure, that is."

Was he playing me? Damn that hundred-volt smile of his. The heat ran up my legs in slow, long licks of lust.

"Actually," Jacques stretched his hands behind his neck. "My diary's

hectic the next few weeks. If you've got a minute, I can show you around this afternoon."

Nomfundo answered first. "I can't, sorry, but I know Madge is available."

My mouth opened then shut. "It might be a bit of a tight squeeze. Media training, sorry."

"That's what I forgot to tell you earlier", Nomfundo clicked her fingers. "The client asked if you could postpone."

Jacques' eyes met mine, deep dark pools that betrayed not a flicker of emotion. "Looks like you're free after all."

Fine. I'd do this. Keep it professional. "I'll come through to your offices around one."

"Done." He offered his hand. *Boyohboy*, did we seem to be shaking hands a lot or what?

I shook, careful to match him for strength. Was that a static shock that passed through me? Electricity. *Don't be ridiculous Everson, you're imagining things.* Besides, he was a client now—out of bounds.

MADGE

I turned my car into the JVD parking lot, after having been briefed and checked by the security at the front gate. Rows of BMWs and Mercedes parked alongside my small Ford. Nothing about the two security stops and the height of the wall did anything to convince me that JVD didn't have money to burn and then some.

The second he'd left our office, I'd whizzed through Jacques' company website. This guy could pick up the check for the entire restaurant over and over. Instead he'd taken me for a burger and a flip on his bike.

On automatic pilot, I reached for my lip-gloss for a quick touch-up. What the hell was I doing? I tossed the gloss back into my bag. Why would I give him incentive?

My cell phone rang. Charlie.

I let rip. "For God's sakes, where have you been? I left a message ages ago. Why didn't you tell me that this Jacques guy was some damn venture capitalist?"

"Relax. I said he had his own company."

"Own company? He invests in other people's companies. Do you know how much money that means?"

"You know, Madge, not everything's about money." Charlie sounded the poster woman for snippy.

I swallowed "But he lied."

“What did he tell you?”

“That he was a carpenter.”

“He is. And a venture thing-amywhatsit. Didn’t you think he was delicious? All the women do. Something about that blend of rugged and refined.”

“No, I didn’t. Anyway, he’s a client now.”

Charlie whistled. “Ohhoooo. How very exciting.”

“Only because you don’t have to deal with him.”

“Let me know all the details. Toodles”

Typical sister — only wants to know the lurid and then she’s off back into wedded bliss. What a waste. Why would anyone want to get married? It was so much easier to be single. There was the full use of the remote, and not having to shave your legs, and, and...lots of other things, too that I just can’t think of right now.

It was time to face the enemy, er, client.

Re-adjusting my jacket collar, I marched up the slate tiles, flanked by fountains on either side, as I made for the vast solid wood double-doors that wouldn’t look out of place in a Dracula movie. Ornate chubby cherub fountains spurted water from their mouths. Venture capitalist or not, he still had no taste.

I rang the doorbell, and was buzzed into a reception that was padded from wall to wall with so much plush carpeting it looked as though someone whizzed through every half hour to fluff it up.

“Here to see Jacques,” I said to the receptionist.

“*Mr De Villiers* doesn’t have anyone down on his schedule. What’s your name?”

I noticed the tone of the receptionist’s voice. “Madge Everson.”

Little Miss Receptionist looked very blonde, very small and very sun-tanned. And young. Still, the onceover she gave me made me want to laugh out loud. *He’s all yours*, I wanted to say. No need for me to be singled out as potential competition for this treacherous, double-life blind date horror show that just kept getting worse and worse.

Jacques emerged behind me. My senses reeled at the smell of him. Did he have to smell that good? An instant vision of my body against his. My arms wrapped around him as all that horsepower roared underneath me. The memory of that handshake.

He spoke first. "Glad you could join me. Thank you, Alicia. We'll be heading back out. Take messages. Anything urgent, I'm on my cell phone."

Alicia smiled at Jacques, her eyes freezing me out, before Jacques led me back out the building.

As soon as the door closed behind him, I started. "What the hell kind of game are you playing?"

"Hey, lady, the me you met last night is still the same me of today."

"You said you were a carpenter. You even showed me your hands."

Jacques proffered his open palms. "You show me yours and I'll show you mine. Think I'm already one up."

"You're a fraud. Preying on unsuspecting people like that. It's not fair."

Jacques just shrugged. "Sometimes you got to do what you got to do. Now, you'll be happy to know that my car's over here."

"So sad to be denied a ride on your bike". Sarcasm dropped from my lips like venom. The nerve — the bald-assed nerve — of this guy.

He clicked his alarm button. Lights flashed. He couldn't mean,...it couldn't possibly be? "A Ferrari. *You* drive a *Ferrari*?"

A sleek machine of such indescribable beauty sat there, fire-engine red, of course.

"Guilty as charged. Oh, sorry. I know you prefer BMWs or Mercs. You don't mind slumming it do you?"

The blush rose up my neck. Yep, I probably deserved that. What was wrong with insisting a guy drove a decent car? If he had a good car, he had half a chance of having his own good job. Was that so bad an ask?

A few of my first non-relationships were with guys who said they'd find a job, swore blind they were doing the agency rounds, and in reality

had done sweet blow all but live off my good nature and paycheck. A girl had to be prudent, didn't she?

And, no bloody wonder Alicia the receptionist didn't like the prospect of competition, whether real or imagined. To keep a Ferrari meant that the man in question certainly had a good job.

Jacques waited, holding the door open. Chivalrous pig. How would I get in? The leather seats looked like they'd never been touched, and they were waaaaay down there.

I slid in, my back ramrod straight as I smoothed my skirt over my knees. *Leg, this is not the time to start with your twitchy-twitching.*

Jacques got in next to me, found a pair of dark glasses—what else?—and put them on. Then he roared the engine into life. He would. As he eased the car out of the parking lot, I braced myself. Sure, he started out looking like he'd be slow and steady, but then once on the open road, he'd be an animal.

"First place I want to show you is out west."

I nodded and took out my notebook. "Anything I need to know so I can write up a thorough Q&A?"

Jacques laughed. "I have no doubt of that. Isn't that your dating style? Ask lots of questions?"

"Isn't that how you're supposed to do it?"

"There's no rule book."

I hmped. "Of course there is."

Jacques wove the car through the traffic. People stared. Pedestrians stopped and looked. Even the newspaper sellers and street vendors gawped. I could so get used to this. I stole a glance at him. His tall frame seemed too big for the driver's seat, his thick thighs so close to me, as those beautiful hands gently caressed the steering wheel.

Jacques kept his eye on the road. "What's the first rule?"

"Men should do the running. All phone calls, requests, etc. Nothing a man hates more than being chased."

"You never call a guy?"

“Not until we’re way, way into the relationship.” This guy was a dolt. Just thinking about our so-called date the night before, it was evident he had no clue in the romance department.

“What if there’s something you want to tell them?” He expertly slid the car onto the motorway and made for the fast lane. I leaned further back into my chair.

“Then I wait.”

“And do they have to call every day?”

“Well, yes. Or at least WhatsApp, text, or something.” I watched the Jo’burg suburbs fly past. Gosh, I might actually prefer the bike, but at least there was metal around me now—crunchable metal.

“And do you text?”

“No, I just said I don’t. Where are we going first?”

“You’ll see.”

“Oh good, a surprise.” I hated surprises.

“There is one more thing.” His hand rested on the steering wheel, but now he had only half an eye on the road. “I’m a little younger than I think you think.”

“What does that matter?” I snorted. “How much younger? You’re in your thirties, right?”

“Thirty-ish, *ja*. Twenty-nine...more like twenty-eight.”

I paled. He didn’t seem much younger than me—now I felt ancient.

“Age isn’t a problem is it?”

“Hardly, you’re a client.” I snapped. “Younger business is as acceptable as older business.”

JACQUES

To her credit, Madge hadn't defrosted since she'd seen the Ferrari. In fact, if anything, she'd gone straight from mildly chilly to downright wintry. If she kept this up, there might be snow in Jo'burg yet.

Next to me, she perched on her chair, her knees rammed firmly together, that skirt ever so slightly riding up on the leather seat, giving me an eyeful. Not that I was looking...that often.

Her hair had been ironed back into submission, and those outsize glasses she wore did little to hide her amazing tiger eyes. What I wouldn't do to see that hair across my pillow as she lay beneath me.

A made to be super roadster skirted past, narrowly missing us. *Bliksem*. I needed to concentrate on the road ahead. No more thinking about the honorable Ms. Everson and her potential prostrate position in my bed. *Nooit*. Not like that was going to happen.

My communications officer. My maybe-baby for another date.

Yep, face it – she ain't interested.

But what if she was? She'd definitely blushed around me, and what about that expectant look last night when I hadn't kissed her? And when our hands had touched...could've been static, but I wouldn't bet on it. Not at this time of year. Electricity. Had to be.

Yeah right, no use trying to hide it—admit it de Villiers, you harbor one hot nut for this woman.

I took the 14th avenue off-ramp. Almost there.

“How long has JVD been in business?” She relaxed as I approached the red light. Clearly living on the edge was not for her. I bet she even indexed her book collection, anything to be in control at all times.

“About seven years now, so we’re still relative newcomers to the space. We’re doing our second round of fund raising at the moment.”

Yirre, I sounded as if I were being interviewed on CNBC.

“And how much do you hope to raise?” She wrote in her neat, clipped handwriting in her notebook. Obviously not one for writing on iPads, or any of the other latest technology.

“Where do you find these rules then? *You* magazine?”

“Excuse me?”

“These rules to dating, where do you find them?”

Madge didn’t answer immediately. “Well, it’s...well, it just *is*. Everyone knows them.”

“What happens if you don’t get the memo?”

Madge turned to me, with a big smile. “I guess you just stay single, then.”

“Guess there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking. Being single is awesome. You don’t have to worry about someone else, just you. And you don’t have to worry about someone else letting you down, or worse taking your money. It’s just you, your own rules. Much better.”

I doubted that. Not that I was big into commitment, far from it. The business took most of my free time, and with what I had left, there were more than enough willing bunnies to keep me amused for a few nights or so. But still, to have someone I could be myself with, now that was gold. Not that I’d found it. Well, there had been Sylvie, but that was a long time ago. No way I was going to fall into that trap again.

Madge had warmed to her theme. “And, of course, when you’re single, you don’t have to deal with in laws and his awful friends. And you don’t have to fork out because he’s short that month, or anything like that.”

“I thought all girls like you wanted some big white wedding and a mansion in the suburbs with lots of Labradors. *Top Billing* style.”

Madge laughed out loud. “Why would anyone want that?”

“Just thought your type was all about the biggest day of your life stuff.”

I turned off the main road and headed towards the countryside. So, she didn’t want the big wedding and white picket fence...like I said, interesting. I’d known legions of women, and it didn’t take long to figure out what it was they wanted from me: money, status, all the usual players. Occasionally there were a few, those I’d met at pool bars or out on the race track, who seemed to like me. But as soon as they realized the truth, they changed. Success wasn’t always what I thought it would be.

But this woman. I couldn’t put my finger on it. A snob, definitely. But her actions just didn’t make sense with what she said. Hadn’t she definitely-maybe’d to go to the gardens with me? Her type usually said no. And her frostiness at the Ferrari had been novel to say the least.

She tapped her pen against her notebook. “To return to my question, how much do you plan to raise?”

“How about I send you through the figures later. Right now, I want to show you this place. We started investing about two years ago and it’s starting to make solid returns. Somehow, when I thought about where to start this tour, this seemed like the right spot.”

I parked the car. “Enjoyed the ride?”

“Not as bad as that bike. But still not my favorite.” Madge undid her seatbelt and started to get out of the car.

Definitely there was more to this one than met the eye.

MADGE

For all the thrill of being seen in a Ferrari, actually driving in one had freaked me out. Fast, out of control, that engine's roar resulted in all the squee feelings mixed with the do-you-know-what-could-go-wrong? vibe. I couldn't wait to get back out again.

But how low did they have to make those seats? Using one foot as an anchor, I heaved myself back out, right onto my bad leg. Not anymore, I reminded myself, the doctor said it was almost as good as. *Almost.*

Jacques, who didn't seem to have the same problem, just watched, a goofy smile on his face. He could have helped me, instead of watching as I flashed my panties for the entire world—my Wonder Woman panties. I flushed. Was that from embarrassment or lust? *Wrong word, Everson, wrong word.* Still, that lazy-edged look on his face suggested the enjoyed watching me battle out the car, and legs and panties probably had something to do with it.

Fine. Let him look. I was damned if he thought he was going to get to touch as well.

His hand found the small of my back and gently tapped. "This way."

My temperature rose. Had he read my mind? The exact space on my flesh where his fingers had touched, tingled. That memory of me wrapped round him on the bike sprung up again.

Damn. It.

How was I going to get through this afternoon? Jacques had carried

on talking about his business. I could barely listen. What if his fingers trailed back towards me? Would he try and touch me again? Would he brush past me? Squeeze my arm? Pull me towards him and kiss me so hard and so quickly, only the tell-tale bruising on my lips would be the evidence?

“And that’s why we decided to invest in Mampoer and Son”, said Jacques, heading toward an open warehouse.

“Right.” I pretended to make notes. Shit. I’d missed every word he said. *Concentrate, just concentrate. This is your job, not a first date, sorry, second date, with a younger man, a much younger man, who drives investment cars and has a thriving VC business.* He had his pick of any woman, not mid-thirties investor relations professionals who drove six-year-old hatchbacks.

Business, Everson, just do your job. Promotion potential, right here.

“And how much did you invest, did you say? I want to get down the exact figure”, I asked, pen poised.

Jacques smiled. “I didn’t say.”

“Right. Shall we go in then?” I was determined to try and regain the upper hand so I strutted in front of him towards rows and rows of flowers. What was this? A florist? Surely not. Not enough money in floristry.

“Cut flowers can be very lucrative, wouldn’t you agree?” He walked past me toward one of the workmen.

Oh, right. Flower farm. Right.

Now that I thought about it, I’d driven past this particular flower farm a number of times. Rows and rows and rows of plants, all under shade, with complicated looking irrigation systems that loomed above us.

Jacques finished with the workmen and ambled back over to where I loitered. Oh, and what a walk too. Strong and sexy, those powerful thighs stretching the material of his trousers. My eyes scanned up and down, up and down. Did I like what I saw? Did I!

“Let’s give you the tour.” Again, his hand guided me, low on my back, not quite on my bum, nothing indecent, but definitely intimate.

Half an hour later, we’d walked plenty. *God, why oh why was I in heels?* My feet burnt. Any second now, my leg would buckle and I’d be hop-a-long Cassidy. Still, I kept up with Jacques who prattled on and on about the cut flower business. Would he just shut up already and head me to the nearest seating zone?

“You seem to know a lot about it.”

“Since I’m putting money into it, it would be foolish of me not to know about it. Pity Gert Mampoer isn’t here. It might be good for you to talk to him as well.”

I nodded. “Does help to speak with the owner.”

Couldn’t we just stop walking already? How many miles away was the warehouse now? The sun beat down on my back, the heady smell of summer thick in the air. I hadn’t seen a single other person in a while.

“You okay there?” he asked, as I stumbled along behind him.

“Great,” I answered in a sing-song voice. Just damn peachy.

With every step, I’d tried to convince myself of all the reasons as to why I didn’t find Jacques attractive, which of course was complete rubbish. His hand kept finding mine, any excuse to find me. *Look at this here, touch my hand, look at this, touch my shoulder.*

Each touch felt like slow torture. So slight and so gentle, almost not a touch, more a brush or a graze. Part of me wanted to push against him, feel him closer to me.

Young, non-committal babyflesh. Client. Off limits. A similar feeling to riding in that Ferrari swept over me, equal parts yeah baby and get the hell away.

Jacques turned to explain something, and I looked over into the distance, anything not to meet his gaze.

The day's heat crept over me. I'd have to take this jacket off soon.

A clank overhead.

Jacques looked up. "*Bliksem.*"

"What? What?"

He looked at me and shrugged. "Watering."

With that, the overhead sprinklers started to rain down.

I stood stock-still for a second, the shock registering as millions of raindrops spattered. I pulled my jacket up over my head and started to run. Well, not run so much as stumbled in high heels, my feet slipping out as the water slid in.

Behind me, Jacques laughed. "Where are you running to?"

"Are you damn mad? I'm getting drenched."

He called out to me. "*Eish.* It's ten minutes to get back outside, may as well enjoy it."

Water streamed down inside my shirt collar, my shirt now fixed to my back. Still holding the jacket above me, I looked back at Jacques.

Joyful as a dolphin, he stood, arms outstretched, embracing the water as it poured over him. I held my breath as I looked over the contours of his fine body. Hard. Muscular. Too much.

My shoe caught, my foot slipping out. Damn it. Now I'd have to go barefoot. Dropping the jacket, I stepped out of the other shoe, then retrieved them both, barefoot.

"Can I help you?" Jacques stood close. Too close. Through the transparent shirt, I could see the outline of his chest. I looked up at him. Water dripped down over his lips and down over the cleft in his chin. With slow hands, I pushed my glasses up onto the top of my head.

His fingers traced along my neck, lingering on my collarbone, weaving under my damp collar, pushing the sodden material back. "You seem to be getting wet."

A pause.

Then he put his hand behind my neck, pulling me towards him. The cold of his lips as they met mine, the warmth of his tongue, of his mouth,

as he kissed me. Hard, just as I'd imagined, but tender too. Slow. Languorous. The water slid down my face, as I kissed him back.

Both shoes dropped in the mud. Forgotten.

My hands reached up and over his shoulders. Oh yes, this was better, so much better than I'd imagined. With every flick of his tongue, I remembered desire. It had been so long, if ever, since I'd felt like this, to meld with another human being and feel him melt into me.

His fingers ran through my hair, pulling me closer.

I could feel his hardness, smell the heat that rose between us. Too much. Too much.

Fumbling for my glasses, I pulled away.

"Sorry, I don't know what I was thinking." Picking up my shoes, I dashed back toward the warehouse, careful not to slide my way to another accident.

I waited by the Ferrari, well aware of the pairs of eyes who looked in amazement at the drenched woman wringing out her jacket before putting it back on. No way was anyone getting a free show. What did they think this was? Miss Flower Farm Wet T-shirt? Despite the heat, the clammy material stuck like icicles to my skin. I did up my jacket buttons - not that it made much difference.

Jacques sauntered back out towards where I stood. Did it faze him? Not to look at him. God, I really, really, shouldn't have kissed him. Any pretension of professionalism was gone. Vanished. Unable to be claimed back.

As soon as I got back to the office, I would hand this client back to Nomfuno, notes and all. *Notes*. Ohmygod.

"You look like you're going to be sick. Are you okay?" His hand stretched toward my shoulder.

I bobbed and weaved away, my stomach somewhere on the ground.

“My notebook. I must have left it in there. All of my notes, gone. How am I supposed to get them back? There was everything in there. Everything.”

Ideally, I should just laugh it off. So, it was wrecked, so what? Nothing that couldn't be replaced.

Instead I went full-on berserker. “I need those notes. How the hell do you think I'm supposed to do my work without my workbook, hey? Hey? Easy for you with all your cars and money and farms and things, but I need my work...”

My promotion, I wanted to scream, but I kept that back. Instead, I cried out loud into the ether.

Realizing I'd gone beyond too far, heck even taken out a frequent flyer plan, I shut up. Notes could be replaced, right? And then a little truth bobbed about on my emotional wavestorm: Why had he kissed me? Did he have to kiss me?

Jacques rushed forward. “I'm sure we can make a plan, find it, dry it out, something. Wait, I'll go ask for help.”

“Forget it, it's fine. It's nothing.” I wiped away the last of any possible mascara that might have survived the downpour. I turned away from him, every ounce of frost I could muster building a wall between us. “Just take me back to the office.”

I squatted back into his car.

How could I have yelled? In front of him? Like some hysterical woman who couldn't be relied upon to be civil, polite, professional even. So we'd got caught in some sprinklers, and kissed. He'd *kissed* me. And that was professional how exactly? Heat soared up my legs, resting in the pit of my groin. I shuffled around on the leather seat as the shame enveloped me.

Losing him as a client was not an option. Best I remembered that.

Jacques shifted the Ferrari down the highway.

Silence ate up the miles.

Jacques cleared his throat. “Can I get you something warm to drink?”

Your teeth haven't stopped chattering since we left."

Not as efficient as a cold shower, or an ice bath, but coffee wouldn't hurt. "It's just a little water, I'll survive.

Maybe it was the setting? The sheer unexpectedness of it? But when his lips had met mine, I'd forgotten to think, I'd forgotten to stream through to my consciousness a list of instructions about what should happen, needed to happen, and instead, I'd just let myself be kissed. A warm, wet kiss, all sticky and hungry.

And now, I couldn't think of a thing to say at all.

"Damn." Jacques swerved as a truck with a death wish clogged the fast lane. "Forgot to pick up some flowers for your office. Which are your favorite?"

I relented. "Stargazer lilies. With the pollen cut out otherwise it spills everywhere."

"I must remember that."

"But there's no point getting flowers. They die. My mother refuses to have flowers because they're cut down before they bloom and then a few days later when they have bloomed, that's it. Time for the trash."

Jacques winced. "Put like that—"

"It could be because my father never brings her flowers. Ever." I gazed out at the world whizzing past us. "She does sometimes prune her roses and bring them in the house, so there's that."

"Do *you* like them?"

I hesitated. "I love them."

We reached JDV's offices, my hatchback exactly where I'd left it. "Thank you, Jacques for the visit, I'll put together a strategy and send it out to you by close of business. Does that work for you?"

"Madge." His voice was soft as his hand briefly tapped mine. His touch sent little shivers of yes-please through me. "I'd like to take you out."

I opened my mouth to answer. He put up his hand. "Hear me out. Three dates. And they're not going to follow a pattern or come from your

book of rules. In fact, the only thing I'd like to conform with is asking your permission."

"But, I'm working on your account. That's not professional."

"I had a feeling you'd say that. How about we schedule the three dates for after our announcement? And no, I won't be considering retainer services, before you ask."

I saw my partnership sliding away—no retainer. With one long gulp, I finished off my coffee. "You should consider it. These days reputation management is essential to retaining your stakeholder base and—"

"Thanks for the pitch, Madge, but I want to get to know you, not your professional ability, which I'm sure is higher grade."

"Three dates and then what?"

"If it's not happening, then we shelve it, but if it's—"

"Happening?" I asked, as sarcasm made a late entry.

"Then we take it from there."

"Gosh, how spontaneous. Talk about making love sound like a transaction."

Jacques tilted his head to the side. I could read the amusement in his eyes, and the way his lips curved upwards. What the hell did he think was so funny about my comment? It *was* a transaction. Three dates in exchange for playing getting-to-know-you? Ah, way fun.

"So will you?"

I dared to look up into his eyes. Damn those eyes. A quick glance to that delicious mouth, and I was hooked.

"Okay, fine." Three dates. Just the three dates, and then it was *sayonara*. Of that I could be completely sure.

MADGE

I arrived bang on time for dinner at my parents. Charlie was nowhere in sight.

“Did you remember to bring wine? Your father forgot. Again. I think he does these things to test me” were the first words my mother uttered. I held up a bottle. She took it from me. “Good.”

I followed her into the kitchen. Bedlam reigned. Three cats ate from their bowls on the windowsill while the washing machine made its no doubt fifteenth trip of the day. Dirty plates sat in the sink — no-one had got round to emptying out the dishwasher yet. An Alsatian slurped water from its bowl across the room.

Inside the oven, a Food Lovers Market pre-made meal heated up. I dumped my bag and rolled up my sleeves.

“Just get those veggies going.” Mom pointed to some heat-and-eat spinach and butternut multi-pack. I grabbed a fork, pierced the plastic sleeve and bunged them into the microwave. Mom made swift work of the cork. She took a long swig of her own wine before pouring out a glass for me. “Much better. I ask him one thing, *one thing*, and he can’t be bothered to remember. Typical, isn’t it? How’s work?”

My mother glugged at her wine as if it was water. Any second now and she’d be at the halfway point. Her hand rested on the wine bottle.

I took a sip of my wine. “Work’s fine.”

“The partnership? Is it going to happen?”

“Should do.”

“That’s my girl. Can’t have two of you in the family running around following your passions, and all that crap.”

First glass of wine already down the hatch, mother dearest started up on the second.

I gritted my teeth. “Mom, Charlie’s work’s successful. She’s having her second exhibition already. And she won that huge commission for the new children’s hospital.”

Mom looked doubtful. “Still. Not the same now is it? It doesn’t bring in the money. The moola is what’s important.”

“I didn’t hear you come in, Madge.” Dad strolled in from where he’d been ensconced watching rugby on television. He gave me a quick peck on the cheek, and then set to re-filling his whisky tumbler. “Is there news on the partnership then?”

“Not yet,” I replied.

He hovered, took a sip, then retreated to his den.

Mom threw a two-fingered V salute to his departing back. “I’m so sick of having to do this dinner shit every night. And he still expects a full meal even though he knows I’m working and he’s not and—”

“You could divorce.” The microwave *pinged*.

“On what money? The university pays a pittance.”

I yanked the veggies out with the tips of my fingers, my teeth clenched together. “Tell him you need help then.”

“Ha! He’s not about to change now. He expects me to have a meal on the table...”

I zoned out her monologue that I’d heard at least three billion times before and finished my wine as mom settled into her second glass. Drunk was the only way to get through family dinner. Or work through the remaining teeth enamel I had left as I gritted back what I wanted to say.

My mother watched me arrange the vegetables on a dish. “Did they say when they’d speak to you about the partnership?”

“No, I haven’t heard anything.” Did I shout that? I might have

shouted that.

“You need to be more proactive. Don’t wait for them to come to you. It’s about time something you did paid off. There was the skating, and you gave that up. Then there was the accounting degree. You’ve been at Capitol Hill for ages, and no sign of any commitment from their part yet. You do need to think of your future you know.”

“Yes, I know. It had occurred to me.” *Fuck.*

A door slammed. My sister burst through the door, a clanking carrier bag over her arm. Her pasted-on smile was in place as she draped her arm around our mother.

“Where’s your husband?”, was my mother’s greeting.

“Working. Busy on some project. He sent his love.”

My mother rolled her eyes and took the carrier bag from Charlie. She’d never liked Brian. Thought he was beneath Charlie. Charlie, the daughter who couldn’t pull herself towards herself in a well-paid corporate job, had landed one of the country’s youngest multi-millionaires, but never mind about that. And, of course, Brian loved Charlie. Properly loved her for who she was, the whole kit and caboodle.

“He works late *a lot,*” said Mom, the emphasis clear.

Charlie dug about in the cupboard until she found a bag of crisps, ripped them open and started eating. “As would you if you ran a couple of companies.”

“Couldn’t you find someone who was more of a homebody?”

“Because that’s what men are like. C’mon mom you know you’re talking drivel. Look at dad. He was always working. Brian’s no different. Although he does make breakfast for me.”

“Yes, you seem to be expanding somewhat again, Charlie. Madge, I think the dinner’s ready.” I checked the ready-made in the oven, confirmed its readiness and pulled it out.

“But I suppose some men prefer bigger women, don’t they?” Mom continued.

Charlie chucked the crisp packet back in the cupboard and looked at

me. "Should I leave again? Might be better, hey?"

I agreed. "You and me, sister."

"Just saying it as it is," said Mom. "Right, dinner's ready."

WE SAT IN THE LOUNGE, our empty plates on our laps. Cats took up any place not occupied by humans. The TV blared on and on to no-one in particular. Well, Dad did have half an eye, and a whole ear, trained on some game.

Most of the ready-made meal had been demolished. We all agreed that perhaps the veggies had needed a little longer nuking in the microwave and we all agreed that chocolate pudding made a fine dessert. Again, a product of Food Lovers Market.

Only Mom agreed that I needed a decent man to complete my life.

"Can we drop the subject already?"

Mom was reluctant. "Charlie, don't you know anyone? A nice man?"

Charlie positioned her empty plate on the coffee table. "Nice? That's like a helluva thing to call someone nowadays."

Mom bristled as she lit a cigarette from a poodle-shaped lighter. "Don't swear, Charlie."

"I did set her up with this one guy I know who's *helluva* 'nice' to use your word. But it didn't work out, right?"

I looked at the floor — wooden, polished sometime the week or month before, bits of traipsed-in dirt everywhere. *Please shut up, Charlie.* Anything about Jacques was on a need to know basis, and my parents did not need to know.

Mom finished the how many-eth bottle of wine. "What did you do to put him off?"

I swallowed back the irritation that stuck like sweaty thighs on a plastic chair. "Why do you assume it's always me?"

She carried on: "I wish I could see what it is you do so I can give you

pointers. Always easier to see from outside.”

Dad angled his head towards the game show that had just begun.

My words were clipped. “But you’re happy for me to get the partnership, which would mean I’d be making more money and spending more time at the office? How does a man fit in all that?”

“I only want to see you with someone nice, that’s all.” Mom puffed on her cigarette. “Not that there are many nice men out there. Cats are much nicer than men. When I was younger, I only ever wanted my cats. No babies for me.”

“Maybe it should have stayed that way,” muttered Charlie, as Mom carefully avoided disturbing the cats that sat on her lap as she leaned towards her ashtray.

“If a nice guy comes along, we’ll date, okay?” Three dates, to be exact. “Can I focus on my work, please? I can’t just give up what I’m doing.”

“That makes a change,” said my father, forking up a last mouthful. “I still have some of your old skating trophies, do you want to take them back with you?”

His words stabbed at me.

My mom propped her feet on the coffee table. “All we want for you is a nice man, with a good job, who went to a good school. No—make sure he has lots of money so he can keep you in the style to which you are unaccustomed. Hahaha! He can keep me, too. Forget this love thing.”

Oh, that was all, was it, mother dearest? My father’s words raced through my mind. I didn’t *want* to quit skating, I *had* to. Big difference.

Well, Jacques seemed a nice man. He didn’t have a job, he *created* jobs. But he could forget about me falling in love. After my last rough and tumble on the ice, I would not be falling again, period. Three dates or not. Great kisser or not. I was not about to throw everything away—again—on something that might not work out.

“Pity it didn’t work out with my guy,” said Charlie, as if reading my mind.

My father ambled his way off down the corridor.

“But don’t marry him,” suggested my mother. “I loved your father and look at what I got. He snaps at me all the time, and he never helps me, just waits for me to do everything. And *mean*. He opens his wallet and maggots drop out.”

Fueled by wine, resentment simmered off her.

“Did you manage to get a hold of Sylvia the other day?” asked Charlie. “I bumped into her at the bakery.”

And thanks for changing the subject, Charlie. “Yep, new client needs training.” A silent understood nod to Charlie who rolled her eyes at our mother.

“Who’s Sylvia?”

“Brian’s media person. Works with Madge sometimes. You’d hate her. She’s really wealthy with lots of men crawling all over her.” Charlie stood up. “I have to go, early morning tomorrow.”

I took my cue. “It’s been great, thank you.”

My father returned, a supermarket carrier in hand. “Here.” He dumped the bag. “They can clutter up your home now.” I didn’t need to look to know it was every cup, ribbon, trophy I’d won since I was four. The same awards that once upon a time had graced the lounge mantelpiece.

“Gee, thanks.”

I didn’t cry until I pulled the bedcovers over my head, safe in my bed in the house that I’d bought.

MADGE

A week later, I wanted to punch Jacques de Villiers. Punch him. Smack him in the nose. Wham, slam, thank you ma'am.

Far from displaying the easy charm and warmth of a pussycat, he'd morphed into a tiger. A man-eating, prowling beast of a man who barked orders down the phone, texted at any time of day or night with a suggestion, and who now ripped apart my press statement.

"I don't like that line there." He stared at the A4 page. He'd been staring at it so long, I thought it would combust.

I did my best to maintain my professional voice. "Which line?"

Yes, which line did not meet with his highness's expectations this time round?

One big, ball-fisted smack, straight in the jaw—yep—that would deal with my frustration.

I'd wanted professionalism, and my had he dished it up and served it up on a platter.

And yet, when he wasn't in the room with me, I couldn't stop thinking about him. The way his voice sounded like gravel. The way he wore his watch on the wrong hand. The way he squinted when he was tired. I couldn't wait for his announcement to be over so that we could fast forward to date number one.

He pointed at the statement. "This one here about the opportunities in Africa. Sounds too vague, don't you think?"

And yet he nit-picked at every last thing I suggested. Maybe he'd forgotten the three dates? Flirting was clearly a dirty word in his vocabulary. Perhaps I *could* wait for those three dates, after all?

I spoke slowly. "Do you want to specify the countries then? You can always say Nigeria, Ang—"

"No, maybe leave it as Africa then. We haven't confirmed all the countries yet. Where is we at now?"

"*Are* we at now," I automatically corrected him. "And?"

I stifled a yawn. It was nearly nine. At night. I needed sleep sometime this week.

He looked up. "Leave that line in."

I refrained from saying, *oh goodie*. It sounded facetious. But boyohboy, did I think it.

"Right." I yanked the statement from him. "If that's all, then we can send it out in the morning to the—"

"What time?"

"We usually send out around seven, I'll put the instructions together for Nom, and she'll—"

"Do you think we should maybe wait another day or so? Strike just before the weekend?"

"Friday is the worst day for news. It'll just get lost in the journo's inboxes. Friday is the day for killing stories."

The squinting started up in his left eye which he rubbed. "But I've got a meeting tomorrow afternoon."

Say what? "But you can take the calls from journos right?"

He blinked a few times. "Not during the meeting."

"Before and after?"

He nodded, then began to check his phone. Which he did maybe a thousand times a day. Always on, always scrolling through.

I hurried back to my desk, made a few amendments to the statement, attached it to the email I'd prepared and hit send. With hurried fingers, I switched off my computer, and yawned long and loud. Bed time, here I'd

come!

Looking up, I saw that Jacques had finished with his phone. He regarded me. "I'm a bit of a perfectionist when it comes to work."

A bit? He'd give me a run for my money any day. I picked up my bag and jangled my keys. "It's fine. Just make sure you've given me at least one day in your schedule for all the media interviews. I need the whole day, no meetings, nothing else, okay? Oh, and we're good for training tomorrow? I've secured Sylvia Booyens, you'll love her, she's the best at media training. You remember her? She used to work for—"

"Prime Night investigative news."

"I see you read the CV I sent you."

He didn't answer.

I headed for the office door while he walked alongside me. "Looks like we're the last ones here." One by one, I switched off the lights.

Suddenly, I was very aware of him next to me. His presence, his maleness, the sheer size of him.

I could smell the lemon tang that intermingled with hot male flesh. What I wouldn't do to lead him into one of the boardrooms and kiss him, feel him, touch ...

His voice broke my reverie. "I'll meet you there, at the studio tomorrow then?"

"That works." I adjusted my suede skirt that had taken for-e-ver to decide to wear that morning. Any time Jacques was expected in the office, I had an attack of the wardrobe indecision.

For what though? He'd barely looked at me. If I'd strutted in front of him stark naked, I doubted he would have looked up from his phone. All business.

Professionalism—exactly the way I'd wanted it.

JACQUES

I reached the office's front door and waited for Madge. This was way more difficult than I'd imagined, *way* more.

And look at how fate had conspired to have the two of us here, together, alone, in the dark — any number of potential opportunities for this to go pear-shaped at any second.

Not that she'd so much as smiled a little too long at me. Or softened as she said my name. *Yirre*, not even close, buddy.

She'd been the picture of freeze queen supreme ever since she'd been hired.

Had I dreamed up that wonderful wet, steamy kiss? When she rubbed her eyes just now and her eye make-up had smudged round her eyes, well, that had been the first time I'd seen any crack in her veneer. Just that little touch of vulnerability had wormed in to a warm place somewhere in my heart's vicinity.

The blood also rushed to my groin. So not a good time.

Hadn't this gone exactly as I'd wanted? A whole lot of getting to know her outside of the dating arena?

Madge had switched off every light in the building and was now opening up the alarm case's flap.

I looked around the abandoned office. "Don't you have a security guard?"

She nodded. "At the main gate."

“But the main gate’s like *lank* far away.”

“Get ready to move fast, de Villiers.” She typed in the key code, slamming the flap back. I stood there, causing her to bump into me. Her so close, so soft, so... “Move!”

I followed her out the door.

She headed towards the parking lot - the *dark* parking lot, striding purposefully, but I could see that there were any number of ambush possibilities scattered round this particular office park—way too many empty, peopleless buildings, with way too many lights switched off.

“Madge, aren’t you worried to walk out here late like this? There could be *tsotsis* just waiting.”

Without thinking, I put my arm round her back. She jumped.

“What are you doing?”

“Just making sure that...” my voice trailed off. What was I doing? Knee-jerk was to stand behind her, in front of her, to the side of her, wherever I needed to be to protect her from anything and anyone. Ninja mode.

“I don’t know,” I replied. Which was the truth.

“The guard’s down there.” She pointed to a shadowy figure miles away from where she’d parked her car. Oh yeah, *bladdy* wonderful. She was all the way up here. Far away, not in earshot. *Bliksem*, my protective mojo kicked in high gear.

She opened her boot, swung in her handbag, slammed the boot and turned to me. “It’s so cute that you’re worrying about me.”

My ears pricked up. Was that a...flirt? “Cute? I’ll take it. What else do I do that’s cute? I know, it’s that tea I made for you.”

Madge made a gagging noise. “Not your finest moment, but you sure can make a kickass coffee. Starbucks has nothing on you.”

“What can I say? I’m dangerous with a pod machine.”

Was that a...smile? “Locked and loaded. Might actually do some serious damage with the espresso option. But the cappuccino might be the weak spot in your defense.”

“That *blerrie* cappuccino — always steaming up my plans for world domination.”

She laughed. I soared straight up to that crescent moon that smiled down.

I reached forward. She reached forward.

We both pulled back.

Madge twiddled with her car keys. “Good night then. I’ll let you know what the response from the journos is.” All business again.

She climbed into her car.

No. Wait.

I motioned for her to wind down the window. “Let me know when you get home.”

Madge looked unimpressed. “Yes, mom.”

I stepped away as she started up the motor and backed out the parking bay. I waited until her taillights disappeared. All good.

As long as she got home safe, I was happy.

And tomorrow was a big day. Sylvia Booyens’ media training. I sighed—yep, tomorrow was going to be a big day.

MADGE

I waited in the studio's lobby for Sylvia.

Jacques had texted that he was on his way. Had my heart fluttered when his text came through.? Like a nodding dog on a dashboard, it had.

A thousand outfits lay abandoned and scattered over my bedroom floor. Why? He'd seen me in any number of outfits, including a wet t-shirt. It didn't matter. Wrong, *today* mattered. Sylvia practically oozed sophisticated glam—uber groomed and gleaming.

One day, some day, I'd be half the mover and shaker Sylvia was. Sharp, smart and sassy—she didn't let anyone get her down. And she'd hiked up that pro ladder, one heel at a time.

And now I stood there waiting for her.

I examined the 150th million outfit—the winning outfit—a tweed number that was a little shorter than my others. My hair was freshly straightened. I could handle anything. Even Sylvia's high-voltage vavoom. Speaking of which...I turned in the direction of stilettos clacking. Aha. Talk of the she-devil.

"So good to see you," said Sylvia in that firm, yet breathy voice that had most businessmen unpack their secrets on national TV.

I embraced her. "Too long. Congrats on the new venture."

Sylvia's wide blue eyes shone back at her. "Not so new anymore. I just couldn't keep up with the bullshit over at the station. Politics."

"Tell me about it." My friend's individual highlights streaked

through her hair. That must have cost plenty. "Capitol Hill's full of it."

Sylvia laughed. "We have to get together for drinks. Been way too long."

"Definitely." Could I ever get my hair that straight? There was not one kink in it, just dead stick straight. "Today's client is a bit media shy. I sent over the docs. We're just looking for the standard theory, radio, TV set up."

"No prob," said Sylvia. "You're in good hands."

I didn't doubt it.

"Still dating that banker guy? Mark, was it?"

"Mike," I corrected. "Ancient history."

"Sad. You seemed to like him."

I shrugged. "You know how it goes."

"Don't I just. I feel like I'd rather just spend my time at home alone, in pajamas, eating ice-cream."

"Amen to that!"

"We need to catch up. Go hell raise. Have fun. Behave badly." Sylvia squeezed my hand.

I smiled. "Totally, a deal."

"Good, I'll send you a message."

We both glanced over as Jacques entered the studios. Man, he looked good. In his jacket, just as I had asked him to be. Ten extra points to him.

He headed straight over to Sylvia, paused, then kissed her on her cheek, while she wrapped her arms around him. A long hug. Definitely more than a few seconds. A slight sigh from her, and then they separated, slow like stretched cheese. Similar to the sensation in my stomach. What was that all about?

"Well done on the business," said Jacques. "Your own thing suits you."

Sylvia flushed. Not a deep crimson or anything quite so vulgar but merely a delicate pink glow. "Jacques, you always thought you knew what was best for me."

I stared. The third-wheel feeling headlined my awkwardness. I cleared my throat. But then couldn't think of anything to say. Not anything that wasn't how-do-you-know, or I-didn't-know-you-knew.

"Jacques, you always swore you'd never be in my hot seat, and now look at you." She fluttered her lashes at him. Hot seat? He looked as if he'd had a season ticket. "Don't worry. I won't give you too much of a hard time." Was that a teasing note?

I cleared my throat, again, as a weird tone I didn't recognize shaped my words. "Should we get along with the training then?"

Sylvia threw back her head and roared with laughter. "I think I trained this one enough for any woman."

I just stared.

"Sylvia's my ex-wife," explained Jacques.

"Madge, while I remember - do I send the invoice to Capitol Hill or JVD? We didn't agree on the terms."

"This is the asshole?" The words left my mouth before I could censor them. "The one that you..." my words faded away.

Sylvia half-laughed. "Well, Jackles, that was at the beginning, to be fair, and you were a teensy bit asshole."

Jacques twitched in his superfine suit. "If you insist."

All smiles, Sylvia flipped open Jacques's file. "Don't worry darling. We all love you now."

I merely arched an eyebrow. Ex-wife? *Ex-wife?*

"Come Jackles, my turn. Get in the hot seat!"

I prickled. Never had Sylvia been so unprofessional. *Get in the hot seat!* And yes, she'd called him an asshole. More than once. And with definite feeling. In public. In *bars*. I rattled my brain to try to remember the details. But I'd met her after Jacques. She was always divorced. Not married.

And here he was. The ex. The I'm-trying-to-melt-your-panties-ex. JVD.

Sylvia had regained some composure and was now pacing back and

forth, talking talking talking to Jacques, her perfectly sculpted legs—coltish, that’s how people described them—on show.

The man who wanted to take me on three dates. And here was his past very definitely presenting with a big, fat pussycat bow.

The producer sidled up to me. “Looks good. The story you’ve built up here.” He held up Jacques’s folder.

He scuttled over to Sylvia who at least looked more like her Linked In profile pic now and less like her Tinder one. The two of them conferred. Sylvia glanced up at me and gave me the thumbs-up. I forced a smile and gave a hearty thumb back.

Damn, if that wasn’t the problem. I *liked* Sylvia.

What else hadn’t he told me? *He had an ex-wife, Sylvia was his ex-wife.*

Jacques sat perched on the hot seat—the *hot seat*—while she waited for her sound guy to fix his mic. Didn’t they make the most perfect looking couple? I slid out my phone. If I Googled them, how many pics would there be of the happy couple? *Put the phone back.* Maybe a quick glance. There couldn’t be that many could there?

I scrolled away, looking every bit the busy pro. And searched! Yes, yes there could be many pics. Them smiling, them holding hands, and *ohman*, there was a bikini shot. Sylvia in a white bikini. Depression central.

With my scars, there was no way I would be wading into bikini suit territory.

“Madge, are we going to go through your questions? I’ve got some of my own. Do you want me to let him have it?”

I looked up. Miss Bikini and her ex-husband. “Let him have it.”

JACQUES

A few days later, Madge stood in my office, getting me ready for Marius Willemse's show. She'd flown through the same questions we'd gone through with Sylvia, making sure I was word perfect. But, sadly, no talking shit about caffeine warfare.

Madge fixed my tie.

"I like the red better than the blue. It goes with your suit." She patted the tie into place, like a doting mother. I preferred the ice queen. "Now, there are no skeletons in your closet, so you should be fine." There was a slight edge to her voice.

"Maybe one or two."

Madge's face froze.

"Relax, they're not going to ask about varsity days. Anything that happened at Tuks stays at Tuks."

"Oh Pretoria," she said, making it sound like a foreign destination.

"Spoken like a UCT graduate."

Madge frowned.

"It's on your company profile." Which I'd 'investigated' along with her LinkedIn profile. C'mon, like *she* hadn't done the same? "What no skeletons with you? No exes? No arrests for streaking?"

"Streaking, I must remember that. Come, we've got to move, or we'll be late. If there's traffic, we'll never get out of Sandton."

I followed her to her car. "You can adjust the seat." I'd offered to

drive and she'd returned with an 'absolutely not'. My head grazed the car's roof and my knees pushed up against the dashboard.

Madge put the key into the ignition, then checked her mirrors, then re-checked, shuffled in her seat, then turned on the ignition, then checked her mirrors again. Next, she made sure she'd locked her door, and reached over past me, and slammed the knob down on my side.

I watched in amazement.

"You should always keep your door locked, you never know," she said.

I didn't want to inform her that my car automatically locked within a few seconds of driving. We might never get to the *blerrie* studio at all at this rate.

Finally, she eased the car into reverse. "Are you sure you're comfortable with being on live TV? It'll be different from the training."

"I've got your talking points here, and I've been practicing what Sylvia said."

"Uhh-humm." Was that a slight attitude in her voice?

"Look, about Sylvia—"

"Might be good if we get her to do some practice with one of your other fund raisers. Maybe even your dad. He'd be good to have as an alternative spokesperson. And I'm guessing he's already met her, at the wedding say, so he's probably okay with her."

"I did apologize already for not mentioning—"

"We're not so far in that we can't adjust and accommodate another spokesperson," she interrupted, shifting her knees towards mine.

It didn't take a mind reader to realize that Madge was obviously pissed about Sylvia, and sure I should have mentioned it, but we were past tense. And I wanted Madge to be all over my present.

Christ, I sounded like a love-struck teenager. Lust struck. *Lust*. No other 'L' word, lurked about.

She was dressed in yet another suit. This one red. A bit air hostessy. She and me in a private plane, no interruptions, her in that outfit, no

bra...I shifted my knees away from hers, and placed my notes folder on my lap. It wouldn't look professional to wander into a TV studio with a huge erection.

"I don't think they're going to ask too many questions about previous fund raisings. If they do, just steer them round to this one. And stick to those figures you're happy revealing. You're not a public company, you're not obliged to disclose anything. Remember that when Marius is grilling you." She pulled into a parking lot. "Right, we're here. Whatever you do don't say 'no comment'. Let's go."

She trotted ahead of me, meeting up with the show's producer like he was an old friend. Kiss kiss on each cheek. Lucky producer.

I was surprised how nervous I felt. Live TV though, and with Marius Willemse. Why had I agreed to this show? This guy went for the jugular. No way he wasn't going to ask the kind of questions that left grown men crying. I'd seen it plenty of times before. Usually in the hands of my ex-wife. She'd been a barracuda too.

Watching Madge work the room though, I had no doubt I was in super pro hands.

She'd advised me to turn this particular interview down, said it might be risky. She was right. Of course, she was. Up close and personal over these weeks, I'd realized just how talented she was at her work. Not a single word or step out of place.

A sound guy came up and attached a microphone. *Yirre, I was sweating*. I noticed the lights, the guest seat I was going to occupy any second now. Ah, and there was the journalist with the shark teeth himself, Marius Willemse. Remind me why I'd agreed to this again? Could it have anything to do with the IR pro I'd hired? No, not at all. Really? Okay, so I wanted to impress her.

Madge marched straight up to Marius, shook his hand, and dragged him over to meet me.

"I see Madge's still doing the bullying," joked Marius as he shook my hand.

“Thought that was your job?”

Madge’s eyes grew wide. “I’ll leave you to it then. I’ll be over there.”
She pointed to a space just past a cameraman.

MADGE

Did the man have a death wish or something? Wait. Wasn't this the same guy who believed in fast cars and faster motorcycles? And not to mention unbelievably hot, talented ex-wives? Ah yes, a death wish for sure.

Didn't he realize how important it was to butter up a journo like Marius Willemse? One false move, and Marius would have him. That's what made his show so popular. So straight out the bat, Jacques went for the cock-swinging comment.

Men.

Really.

There was no need for Jacques to be on this show. None at all.

But he'd insisted. A media rite of passage, he'd called it. How much of it was for my benefit? How much for Sylvia's benefit? Did he want her back? Watching them at the media training had been like watching, well, *not* watching an old married couple. I'd seen Sylvia flirt enough in the past to recognize her in flirt mode when I saw it.

Not that three-date Jacques had flirted back. Not that I could identify.

Worst of all, Sylvia had texted me for drinks. Just like she said she would. The text burnt a hole through my cell phone. I'd have to respond. It was the right thing to do. Pretend like everything was normal.

I glanced at Jacques on the camera monitor. Shit. He looked nervous, the way his tongue kept darting to his lips. Was I watching that closely? I

was, I was.

Marius waded straight in: “Welcome to Jacques de Villers, founder of JVD Venture Capital. Tell me, with this next round, how much are you expecting to raise?”

I shook my head. This was where the wheels would fall off. I braced for the worst.

“More than the last round,” said Jacques. “But it’s not about how much we raise as such, it’s about how much we can invest in businesses that are looking to expand. Isn’t that how entrepreneurs can start to make it in this tough economic climate?”

Marius came at him again, and once more Jacques fielded. “If you look at our track record, you’ll notice that even in leaner fund raising groups, we still managed to invest in some of South Africa’s best-loved brands. That takes a team of dedicated professionals to assess the business...”

As Jacques talked about his business, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. No wonder he managed to get investors to part with their cash, he would have them eating out of the palm of his hand.

Why had I even bothered with media training? This guy knew exactly how to handle himself in front of the camera. Or had his bold and beautiful ex-wife already given him many private lessons? Oh, yes, I bet she had.

Jacques positively oozed charm.

Just like Mike, the last guy I’d dated. Hadn’t he been just as charming, just as persuasive? And he’d convinced me that Saturday night dates were for desperate losers. Or, in his case, I’d realized, for boyfriends who had more than one girlfriend.

Nope. No more persuasive charmers.

JACQUES

Madge smiled at me as I unclipped my mic and handed it to the soundman. "All good."

She pointed in the direction of the exit. "We need to move onto our next appointment."

I looked down at the schedule she'd given me. "How about we just go for a drink instead?"

Her mouth formed a perfect 'o'.

"Just joking." Every time it looked as if I was getting somewhere with her, that shutter would come straight back down again.

She clip-clopped in front of me, giving me a view of her backside as it swayed. I should just forget her, forget all about her and move on. Her and her elaborately matchy-matchy little outfits. Her and her tidy little talking point documents, and never-ending press release thingies. Another ambitious lady with power in mind. I mulled that thought over. Did she remind me of Sylvia?

Sometimes.

That same drive to succeed. Sylvia had trotted up and down my back in her metaphorical spike-heeled boots, climbing her way up her success ladder. Would Madge turn out to be the same?

Sure, this woman had cauterized her way under my skin, but I wanted to be sure. Way too much 'burn, baby, burn' in the past.

Running into Sylvia again had reminded me of that.

The next time I was going to fall for someone, I'd make sure I did my homework first.

Not that working with Madge had been a quiet walk in the park. For every idea I'd had, she'd had about ten more. Usually better. And with more class. Anytime I'd suggested something that might be 'the next best thing', she'd smiled, shaken her head, always with an answer that made 100% logical sense. She thought fast, thought accurate and didn't take 'no' for an answer unless all possible alternatives had been extinguished. She was...remarkable.

It had taken me all this time to figure out where to go. I wanted to get to know Madge—the real Madge—not the work Madge or the Madge who believed in dating rules *or whatever*.

I climbed into the passenger seat of her car and waited for her to perform that elaborate ritual. Only this time I locked the door behind me.

She turned the key and pulled out of the lot. A voice filled the car. "Madge, did you speak to your sister about coming over at the weekend?"

"What?" Then she turned to me, "Oh shit, sorry, it's this new Bluetooth thing, I'll just switch it off." Madge swerved into oncoming traffic as she tried to disconnect. "Whoa!"

A loud hoot distracted her back to the road. "Shut up you wanker, you try drive with that thing on!" She yanked the car back onto the left hand side, the car stalling as she bunny-hopped it into a ditch. "Oh, for fuck's sakes."

The woman's voice rang out even louder. "Language, Charlie."

"Madge."

"Madge. The dog crapped all over the place this morning. I swear it's as if I can still smell it everywhere. I probably got it under my fingernails, though I've cleaned them about five times already—"

"Can I call you back?" Madge stuck her hazards on and was now trying to push a series of buttons which didn't seem to respond. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," she said with each push.

“Would you let me know if Charlie’s supposed to be coming through this weekend? She said she would, and I was wondering if she wasn’t perhaps pregnant. She’s getting a bit chubby again, not that you heard me say it, and—”

“Mom! I’m going to call you back just now. I’ve got a client in the car.” Her hair had that undone look about it, the kind that had me thinking all sorts of non-professional things. As for the color in her cheeks...and that dirty, dirty language. How many fucks in one minute? I’d love to have her say it over and over in my ear while I—

A laugh rang out. “Hello client, sorry about that. But I’m sure they know all about dog crap—”

“Mom! Just. No.” Madge fumbled about with the buttons, still failing to disconnect. I leant over her. My fingers grazed hers as I found the correct switch, and the car fell silent.

Madge stared at the steering wheel. A pink flush had spread up over her neck and cheeks. Was that my heart melting? Did she have any idea just how endearing she was at this moment?

I reached forward.

“Thank you. I’m sure I would have got it eventually,” she snapped at me.

I pulled back again. Maybe I’d been wrong? *Yirre*, had I been seeing glimpses of a Madge underneath her corporate veneer, who didn’t really exist?

Keeping her focus on the traffic, she fixed her already perfect mirrors, and turned the key. “C’mon, c’mon.” The car’s wheels spun against the dirt. “Shit, we’re stuck. Ohman, we’re stuck and you have all those interviews to get to.” She looked as if she’d burst into tears. “You get into my seat and I’ll push.”

“How about I get out, and I push?”

“But you’re in your lovely suit with your smart tie. You’ll get all rucked up.”

There it was! That unfettered softness spilling towards me.

I undid my seatbelt, took off my jacket and rolled up my sleeves. "Ma'am, it would be my pleasure."

From the outside, it wasn't too bad—the car had met with some overgrown land, that was all. A roll to the side and the car'd be out in no time. I spotted something pink as Madge's head stuck out the window. "Will it be okay? Or do we need to call someone?" She stumbled out the car then, tottering towards me on her heels. "It doesn't seem too bad. Maybe if we both push."

"I've got it. Is the car out of gear?"

She nodded. I pushed and the car lunged forward and then rocked backward. Madge stepped out of her shoes. "Budge up."

Hands on the trunk's bumper, I looked at her. "On three. One, two, three."

Together we pushed. The car gave and moved forward. One more good shove and it would be out of there. I turned, my back flush against the metal, ready to push with my thighs. Madge looked doubtful but turned round in solidarity. A livid scar ran down the side of her leg.

"Madge, I got this. Get back in. When I tell you when, start the engine."

She scampered back to the driver's. That was some scar. Car accident? Maybe that's why she was paranoid about the car's locks?

I pushed against the trunk, my heels gouged into the ground, all the strength in my torso shoving against the metal. *Yirre*, I was going to need physio after this. The car lunged a little. "Switch on, give it some gas."

Sure enough, the car bouncy-bounced back out the ditch. No problem.

A squeal from inside the car. I smiled and sauntered back to my seat, careful to lock the car door again.

Madge beamed at me. "You're wonderful, just wonderful. Thank you. What would I have done if you weren't here?"

"Probably called the AA."

"But I didn't have to. Thank you. You're just...brilliant."

“For you.” I presented her with the pink wildflower that I’d eyed growing amongst the grass.

There was that blush again. And a smile as wide as the sun’s rays. “That’s lovely. Thank you.” She brought it to her nose then kissed the petals so lightly if I’d have blinked I’d have missed it.

MADGE

I prayed that my mother did not call back. Not on speakerphone. Not ever. *Never*. Dog crap, she'd chosen dog shit as her topic of the day. Holy shit. Well, yes, actually. I propped the flower up in the cup stand.

Focus on the road, focus.

Warm and fuzzy feelings filled me from my toes to my forehead like a kettle switched on to boil.

Jacques rolled his shirtsleeves back down, buttoning the cuffs. "What happens next? After the media interviews wrap up later?"

I steadied my voice back onto automatic pilot. "We check tomorrow to see what happens in the press, and later this afternoon, as well to see if anything pops up online. Otherwise, we just do some monitoring, and pick up again when you're ready."

In other words, we'd be finished working together.

Which meant...

Jacques filled the silence. "This is the last time we'll be meeting, right?"

"Well, there might be a debrief, if you need ongoing comms..."

Jacques shook his head. Damn. That meant one less opportunity to increase my billing, though somehow my promotion seemed far away right now. The pink flower flopped about next to me.

If my mother hadn't phoned, he wouldn't have helped me out of that ditch.

My mind somersaulted forward. I'd have to introduce him to my family — my parents. Nope, no, this would not do. He'd make for the hills. Dog shit conversations were the least of my worries.

"Fine, no debrief then. We'll get through today, I'll drop you off back at your offices and then that will be that." I left no room for further discussion.

No more Jacques at the office. Good. Right?

"What happened to your leg?"

My hand went straight to my scar. "Skating accident."

"Looks like it was bad."

I sighed. "I couldn't walk properly for nearly a year."

"Poor you."

"It was my fault. Should've been better prepared." How many times had I replayed that day over and over? Didn't change the outcome though. It never would.

We pulled up to our next interview's premises.

"Madge..." his voice dropped, and my heart started to beat inside my chest. This was it. He would reach for me, take me in his arms, kiss me... "I'll be sure to put in a recommendation to your boss. I couldn't have been in better hands."

No saucy wink, nothing, to accompany that comment.

You could have been in my hands, I wanted to scream. I sulked instead. "Only a pleasure."

MADGE

I waited at the bar—not just any bar, but Katy’s Palace Bar. A grade-A meat joint that blasted eighties hits and swarmed with the newly-divorced.

I wriggled about in my seat, well aware that my two-piece suit looked as out of place here as a bowling ball on a squash court. I had another swig of my white wine spritzer. Did people still drink white wine spritzer? I did a quick scan of the bar. Men drank beer, women drank water?

“Darling, I’m late, sorry.” Sylvia blasted past a group of openly salivating men and sat down opposite me. Her blonde hair was still enviably straight, her make-up perfect...and thick. Maybe that was the trick? Layered foundation.

She called over a waiter. “Another one for me, and a round of tequila.”

“Ohno,” I chimed. “School night.”

“Make it a double. C’mon Madge, Jacques’s the sixth client you’ve sent to me this year. Things are looking good at Capital. Live a little.”

Just like that his name was out there already. *Jacques*.

“I didn’t know he was your ex-husband.” Now it was *all* out there. Show and tell.

“We met at uni. He was so cute, rugby guy, you know? Fantastic shag.”

My mouth dried out completely. Fantastic. Shag. Wine, more wine, less of the sparkling water. "And then he became the asshole?"

"Yeah, yeah, he did. C'mon waiter, I need me some liquid refreshment. What do you think of him at the bar? The tall guy?"

"Cute. Why did he become the asshole again?"

Sylvia smiled slowly. "Don't let that charm fool you, he's a workaholic, and he won't stop until he's won. Do you like him?"

"Ohno, not like that. He's a just a client."

"Hmm. Well, he's more than he appears. Actually, I was thinking of ringing him for a kind of nostalgic fun session." Fantastic. Shag.

Any good happy wine vibes I'd cultivated, drained straight out of me. "What?"

"Exes are always the best. You know what he likes, he knows what you like...oh good, here come our drinks. Remember how to do this, Madge? Salt first, lemon last, not like that last time, when you couldn't pick yourself up off the floor."

Fantastic. Shag.

"And then suck on the lemon..." Sylvia demonstrated her expert sucking abilities. I felt a little faint. "Oh yes, bring that bad boy home." Sylvia whooped. I paled.

"Tell me all about your partnership?" Sylvia grimaced as she downed her second tequila. "Enough for me, I think. For now."

"Hasn't happened yet. But fingers crossed."

Sylvia nodded her head. "You should do your own thing."

I balked. "Not for me. I don't like trying to plant roots from a rowboat."

Sylvia clinked her empty tot glass against mine. "I hear you sister. But, you also get your freedom, more money—"

"More responsibility, and what happens if I don't find any clients?"

"You ask your ex-husband." Sylvia giggled and my stomach flip-flopped south. Fantastic. Shag. "Nah, don't worry, you'll see, it's not that bad. Sure, there are bad spots, but you just have a little faith, have a little

hustle, and you'll pull through."

"But everyone knows who you are."

"Not true. That hot guy over there only wishes he did." She flashed me her huge megawatt smile. I smiled back. "I think they're playing our song. Yep, definitely. Come. Let's dance." Sylvie dragged me off to the dance floor.

Another eleventy thousand and something drinks later, I groped about for my cell phone. "Think I'm going to Uber my way out of this one."

"Booty call time?" Sylvia had beaten away so many suitors, I could have quietly cried inside. Who was the lucky guy going to be?

I shook my head, then stopped. Was that the room spinning or had I stumbled onto a roulette table? "No, Mr. Uber. He comes when I call. When I say so, and only me."

"Oooooooo. And he likes to do it in his own car."

"Exacataly."

Sylvia held up her phone. "I'm going to call up Mr. Jacques Devil-liars."

Fantastic. Shag.

Even with the liquor anesthetic, I felt my heart fall outside my body and get kicked into touch. "He probably won't be up this time."

"Oh, he's always up," said Sylvia. "You so know what I mean."

Fantastic. Shag.

Sadly, I did. "I thought it was best to leave the past in the past?"

Sylvia shrugged. "Sometimes." She threw her arms around me. "Oh, it was so good to see you, Madgie. We absolutely, positively, have to do this again. And soon."

I half-smiled back. "For sure."

What did I have to be unhappy about? Nothing. Was I dating Jacques? No. Had he asked me out? Kind of. But were we an item? No. If he wanted to hook up with Sylvia, well, he was very welcome to do so.

Fantastic. Shag.

I felt ill, really I did. Sylvia's thumbs rapped away furiously on her mobile screen, her tongue between her teeth in concentration. "Drive safely," she called out.

I disappeared into the night, searching for my driver in shining uber taxi.

MADGE

I looked at my calendar. Yep. Four weeks. Almost a month. Maybe I'd counted wrong. One, two, three... No matter how many times I recounted, it had been four weeks, almost five, since I'd completed the work for JVD Enterprises.

When the job finished, he'd shaken my hand, and headed off into the sunset. No mention of "I'll call you". Nothing, nada, zip.

But he had sent over a dozen stargazer lilies for the boardroom. They'd lasted three weeks before kicking it.

My pink flower had fared less well — four whole days.

All that talk about three dates. He'd had no intention. None.

And the worst, the absolute worst of it, was how I'd got so used to seeing him, talking to him, emailing him. Did I dare admit to a slight stomach flip anytime he'd reached out to me? Damn. Yes.

And all for what?

Now it was four weeks later. Since I'd met him, the Christmas decorations had long since gone up, schools had closed, and the last day of work loomed.

Heck, the Day of Reconciliation public holiday weekend was right there. Who heard from anyone over the Christmas holidays? No-one. Anyone who was anyone got the hell out of Jo'burg the second the weekend was over with. Ghost town central.

And then there was that other matter. The Sylvia matter. I'd sent a

quick text, thanked her for the drinks, big kiss, that kind of thing. And she'd texted back, 'must do again' with a big red heart, whatever that meant.

Had she'd hooked up with her Mr. Jacques Devil-Liars, as she called him?

Nomfundo joined me at my desk. "Any plans?"

"Staycation time. I guess I'll be cleaning out the cupboards, and having dinner with the folks. The usual. You?"

"Heading out of town early before the rush."

"Wise move. I'm stuck here till Christmas Eve."

"That sucks."

I sighed. "I'll wait till Easter and take my leave then. Maybe head to the Seychelles."

All by myself, is what I wanted to add. Just like the year before, and the year before that. Hell, I hadn't even had a partner for my sister's wedding in Zimbabwe. This had to change. New year's resolution – no more holidays for one, period.

I needed to be more like Sylvia, yes. Bold, out there, confident. A ballsy lady with a penchant for hard-drinking, running her own company, and having a slew of sexy exes to call at any time for fabulous, no-holds barred sex. Yes, more like her. She wouldn't be heading to the Seychelles alone. Oh hell no.

Never give up, never surrender. May the force be with me. Live long and prosper.

Nomfundo shuffled back to her office. I re-arranged my business card holder. I dumped the card holder back.

The morning dragged by as if it were being pulled through cement by a Pekinese-pulled sleigh. Couldn't I go home yet? Every minute after lunchtime took hours to go by.

"Madge?"

I looked up at Mr. Boss Man. "Don't forget we have that performance meeting next week. You don't mind that it's next week? Just super busy

and all, you know how it is.”

I nodded. “I do, I do.”

“Did you manage to work through that series of performance goals for next year? Don’t forget to bring it with. I’ve got some important things to discuss.”

Important things. Like my promotion perhaps? Like my name with *Partner*, stenciled in underneath on an actual office door, my own office door? About damn time too. Six whole years.

Thank heavens. The last thing I needed was to go into the new year with the question of the promotion hanging over me. The very thought made my heart race haphazardly in my chest. A bit like Jacques’s effect on me? Nope, nothing like Jacques’s effect? He didn’t have an effect.

I checked my watch. Two o’clock on the nose. All my filing finished, my in-tray almost empty, my inbox ominously silent after a year of solid pinging. Most of the office had beetled off the second lunch ended. Wise men and women.

Outside, the wide world beckoned. School holidays meant that kids no doubt clogged up the movie houses, loitered round the shopping centers, and hacked up the ice at the rink. I should go skating again. Really, I should. *Just put on those boots and head out to the ice.*

Checking to see who was looking, I searched old Torvill and Dean clips on YouTube. Part of my heart began to tha-thump long and loud. Its message pretty damn clear, *get thee on the ice, goddammit and now.*

Ja. But.

Skating, particularly as an adult, was risky. Like break-your-leg risky, like serious-concussion-and-hospital-stays-with-pipes-in-your-veins serious. Like, goodbye to a potential skating career risky.

I pushed that failure to the back of my mind. The partnership would be mine. I’d prove to myself that it could be done. I could be successful. I would triumph.

My cell phone rang. Unknown number. I answered: “Madge Everson.”

“Is that supposed to be Christmas cheer? Too early for a Christmas hangover?” Jacques.

“Did that file of clippings not get through to you?” Please say he received it – although there was nothing for me to do, I didn’t want the ennui interrupted with anything that vaguely resembled work.

“Ages ago.” A pause. “I believe we had a deal.”

Tingles of excitement started to break out like a heat rash. “Really? Now?”

“Ja, really now. How about you get into that car of yours and drive to Melrose Arch?”

“Isn’t that out of your way?”

“Just come through. I’ll meet you at JB’s Restaurant. I figure a woman like you knows where that is?”

I bristled. “Everyone knows that.”

Jacques laughed. “See you now.”

I replaced the receiver. Now? I couldn’t really leave now? Like leave the office? Just slip out and disappear? But, hang on, hadn’t I worked late nearly every single night this year? And how had I been rewarded? More work, of course. What was one afternoon?

Still.

Couldn’t he have just given me a time? Like six pm. Or eight-thirty?

My throat constricted. Just leave, go. Say it’s the stomach flu, something. With sweaty palms, I closed my Inbox, and shut down my computer. With hurried fingers, I re-straightened the already-straight workstation.

Picking up my bag, I slung it over my shoulder, and announced to the few staff left in the office. “Client meeting, JVD. See you tomorrow.”

No-one so much as looked up. A vague ‘bye’ popped up from one of my colleagues. I waited. Any second now someone would pop up and bust me, say, *hey, anyone could hear that big lie from outer Siberia. The JVD account closed a month ago. No more partnership for you!* But nothing happened.

My heart thumped so loudly, I was amazed no-one could hear it pumping its own percussion sound. Maybe no-one had heard me?

I called out again, this time in a sing-song voice. "I'm on my phone if you need me."

A pause. "Kay," came that same disembodied, bored colleague voice. "Kay," I repeated, heading out the door.

MADGE

It was only in the parking lot at Melrose Arch that I even considered that I wasn't correctly attired for a date.

It would be that day he'd asked, not the previous day when I'd worn my deep blue dress that looked amazing with my hair. Of course not.

Pin-striped suit, hair in a braid, black stilettos. Give me a whip, and I would be all good to deal out some corporate master and servant.

I made my way to the public bathrooms. All that my handbag housed was a stubbed-up red lipstick and a black eyeliner.

With a shaky hand, I tried the lipstick. Far too severe. I rubbed it off, then tried the eyeliner. That didn't work either. A woman emerged from the cubicle, all summery in a pale yellow sundress, suntanned legs and long, flowy ghd'd hair. By comparison, I looked like a vampire and not the sparkly kind either.

Frowning, I swung my shoulders back and headed out for JB's. Anyone who waited four weeks for a date clearly wasn't that interested anyway. And it was his own fault for giving me no time to get ready.

Besides, the four week break from his company had convinced me that he wasn't that great looking either. That day at the flower farm I must have been in peak ovulation or maybe the moon had been full. Either way, I hadn't felt that same heart-stopping—or was that heart-starting?—lust.

Outside JB's, he lounged against a wall, his phone glued to his ear as

he waited. One look and I knew I was lying to myself. He was *gorgeous*. His dark hair, that body of his in those jeans, that shirt, that smile when he saw me walking towards him.

And he wasn't a client any longer. Mental stop signs converged—just because there was no longer a professional barrier, it was no excuse for me to give over to desire. Lust resulted in bad decisions that could lead to things like marriage and years and years of misery. My mother's warnings rang in my ear. Love or any semblance thereof was not for women who ran successful IR campaigns for the prestigious Capitol Hill agency. Ohno.

And, no doubt, just a few weeks ago, or even that morning, Sylvia might have test driven this one again. She also might not have. I had no evidence.

Well, that gave me some confidence. I couldn't possibly compete, so I'd just brazen it out and...please don't let my heels get caught in the stone paving.

Although he continued with the phone call, his eyes ran up over my body and down again, as intimate as kisses. I flushed. Pretending not to notice my body's reaction to him, I acted as if it were a business meeting. *Pretend he's still a client. Just a client.* I gestured towards an empty table. He shook his head.

Confused, I waited as he finished up his call.

"Sorry, that was rude of me." He closed the space between us, and for a second, I was sure he was going to hug me. Instead, he pushed his lips to my forehead, which set a flurry of whip cracking ablaze in my stomach. "And how are you keeping?"

"Great."

I hovered, waiting for him to take the lead.

"My car's this way." He pointed towards a string of parked cars.

"What? We're not staying here?"

My brain whirred into overdrive. Not *here*. Already I'd been imagining what I'd have off the menu, what we'd talk about, how we'd,

maybe, look at the Christmas lights before he walked me to my car, and tried to kiss me goodnight. And best of all, I'd have it all under my control. I had my car. No throwing caution to the wind and surrendering my virtue after one dinner at Melrose damn Arch. But this? What was with this?

He lightly tapped my elbow as he steered me up Melrose Arch's boulevard.

"Don't look so shocked. It was just quicker to meet here, and I didn't want you driving too far."

"You could have perhaps fetched me like normal people do. Or given me warning." Was that an edge in my voice that labeled me as inflexible, totally lacking in spontaneity, and worse still, dull? Guys liked variety and fun-loving women who said 'yes' for everything with a tumbler of Vodka in their hands. Like Sylvia. Be more like Sylvia. Well, I could try, couldn't I?

I scanned for the Ferrari.

"Here we are." He pulled up to a Land Rover plastered in stickers, mud and character with a capital 'C'.

"Another car?"

"Not just another car. This one's special," he said, with a look that caused a contraction of my throat and my core. He seemed pretty special right now, too.

He helped me up into the passenger seat. The inside hummed of engine oil, dank damp and macaroons. There were no back seats, not of any conventional kind, and a fold-up mattress curled up in the corner. A couple of Van Halen CDs were scattered across the floor.

My heels scratched the metal floor. No mat.

The door squeaked as he got in. "You comfortable there?"

"Yes," I lied. "Why are there no seats in the back?"

"To fit my bike."

This Land Rover did more than just mount pavements. Where was the Land Rover that fetched school kids? This one would actually

gallivant up and down untarred terrain.

He started up the motor and pulled out. Wherever we were going, we weren't going to be getting there in a hurry.

"She's a bit slow to start, but once she gets going, she gets going..."

"Where *are* we going?" The windscreen blurred from the inside.

"Quiet, little place I know. Don't look so terrified. You'll like it."

I stopped knotting and unknotting the edge of my skirt. This was an adventure. I needed to just relax a little bit.

JACQUES

I'd wanted to call her earlier. But working my way out of JVD was proving to be more complex than I'd imagined. The next time I ran my own business, my name would not be on the letterhead.

Would she hate the date I'd planned?

For someone like Madge, she'd already done all the 'high' spots, all the restaurants, all the foodie markets. Wrong time of the year for the polo, although she probably went every year anyway. As for something outlandish like trips to the Cape for lunch, well, I didn't want to get burned with too much of the flash and not enough of the getting to know.

I glanced at her. "There's some water in the glove box if you're thirsty."

The afternoon sun warmed the gold in her hair. Natural blonde? I'd like to find out. Those weeks we'd worked together, I'd sometimes have to excuse myself, and head for the bathroom for the cold water to douse the ardor that bubbled up under the surface. Close to, she smelt like crushed jasmine, a scent that laced and wound its way up through my sinuses and down to my groin, pulling at me, demanding my immediate attention.

Just watching her lean over a strategy plan on her desk, the roundness of that perfect ass beneath the suits she always wore was way too much.

But what intrigued me most was that scar. Must have been one hell of an accident to result in a beauty like that. A skating accident, she'd said. Ice or roller? Both fast-paced, adrenaline inducing, dare I say it—potentially dangerous—sports. Sports that relied on speed. In-ter-es-ting.

She opened a bottle and drank, a thread of water escaping from her lips and tracing a path down over her chin, her neck towards those breasts.

I pulled my gaze upwards. *Watch the road.* Just because I was on a date, didn't mean the traffic cops had gone on hiatus.

"You want some?" she asked.

I shook my head. Just watching her with that bottle was giving me a hard-on that would be difficult to miss.

"Where are we going?" she asked for about the hundredth time. Not one for surprises, our Miss Madge Everson.

"Just trust me."

Somehow I reckoned that was the last thing she was capable of doing. Trust. Wasn't that always the issue of anyone who liked to be in control, all the time?

"So, Madge..."

"So, Jacques..."

"Tell me about that office of yours. You running for partner?"

She squirmed at that. Bullseye. Why she hadn't been given it yet, floored me. God only knew, she sure as hell deserved it.

"It is sort of something I'm kind of hoping for."

"That's sounds kinda sorta vague?"

A pause. "That's because I don't want to jinx it."

"And you think saying it out loud will do that? Isn't that what you're supposed to do? Say what you want from the rooftops?"

Madge glanced over at me. I could feel the laser beam of her gaze burning a hole in my skull.

"I don't believe in counting chickens. I'd prefer to be certain of something before I make any bold announcements or pronouncements."

“Check over the fine print and run it past the clients?”

“And how many times did that press release get changed?” Touché.

Suddenly my grand idea for a memorable first date, didn't look so grand. Oh *ja*, this had been a bad idea. She'd hate it. Too late now. Up ahead was the turning.

A gasp from Madge. Shock? Horror? Distaste?

“Hot air ballooning? That's where you're taking me?”

I shrugged. “Only way to see a sunset.”

No response to that. *Ay, vok*. I'd given it my best shot. “You don't like balloons?”

“Not when they go pop, no.”

“I don't think this one will. It comes attached with a basket. Higher grade.”

Hands fluttered to her skirt, smoothed down, fluttered back to her neck, scratched, raked through her hair. She cleared her throat and shifted on the chair. She could win a prize—hell an Olympic gold medal—for fidgeting. No wonder her figure looked like it did. Sitting still didn't appear to be in her vocab.

I turned left towards the balloon safari. And just as I'd requested, the balloon was fired up, ready to go, a champagne basket built for two all waiting. I just needed my date—my reluctant date.

“We don't have to, you know.”

She peered past me at the balloon that waited. Inhaling enough to inflate the balloon herself, she then answered. “Okay.”

“*Ja?*”

That beautiful head of hers nodded. Reluctantly. But it was a nod.

MADGE

Perhaps when we were still on the ground would have been the best time to tell him. Or before he parked. Or when I'd said yes to his request for three dates.

Either way, the ground beneath us started to disappear and with it, most of the stability in my stomach.

"Wait till we get up high," said Jacques, as excited as a young boy. Well, he would be excited, adrenaline addiction seemed to be his thing. "The view! You've never seen anything like it. Just beautiful."

He looked straight at me as he said that. I felt every syllable of that word 'beautiful'. Felt that word still my heart for just a second as the basket wobbled, the flame rose between us, and the balloon swelled higher.

I couldn't help it. The squeal escaped my lips, followed by a series of hyperventilating breaths that squeaked. Terra firma, that's what I needed, not an escapade up in the skies. I tried as best as possible to keep myself steady, but it just wasn't happening. *Sit*. If I just sat, I wouldn't have to worry about anything around me.

I started to crouch when Jacques's solidity came up behind me.

"You okay?" He wrapped something warm across my shoulders, then lightly placed his hands on my hips. I felt better. The warmth of the blanket. The warmth of his hands. That lemony tang of his skin beckoned to me. So good.

“Better?”

I nodded.

Around us the summer Highveld sky dazzled in a series of pinks and blues, leftover storm clouds streaking silver across the expanse. No doubt, being in the air still terrified me. But...but, that wasn't what was getting my heart to race. Ohno. Jacques had moved closer. I closed my eyes. He wrapped his arms around me, my head leaning against his chest.

My breath steadied, a solid feeling of calm resting in my belly.

And his ex was Sylvia. *Yes, thank you brain for your merry intrusion there.* I couldn't remember ordering a reality check, but boy, if my own conscience wasn't keen to give me one.

The balloon swayed. I tilted back into him. He caught me.

“I'm not going to let anything happen to you.” He pulled me even closer.

That's what they all said at the beginning. *I'm not going anywhere, I'm not going to hurt you, this time it will be different.*

Maybe this time it would be different.

I closed my eyes. My head whirred and swayed along with the basket. *You have to let it go. C'mon Madge, at least try and appreciate the view.*

Keeping my gaze fixed forward, I stared out into the sky. The sun had begun its descent, shimmering waves of orange, pink and yellow in its wake. “Wow, it's really something. I should take a photo but it wouldn't do it justice.”

“Some champagne?”

“Just when I thought things couldn't get more perfect.”

“Leave it to me.”

The night air caressed me with its soft fingers. Around us, the rolling Magaliesberg hills were quilted together by trees, the rich jeweled colors signaling abundant summer rains. At the horizon, Johannesburg rose with its concrete pillars. Somewhere in there was my home, nestled in the manmade forest that canopied over the suburban homes and streets.

To the north, I couldn't miss the Northgate dome. I sighed. "I spent most of my childhood right there."

I pointed to the dome as Jacques handed me a glass. "At the rink. Every day, morning and evening, weekends too. Figure skating."

The champagne tasted like spring in a glass, fruity, bubbly and slightly chilled. Jacques's arms wrapped round me once more. "Were you good?"

"I was a nine-time national champion. Won every trophy they had going. And I competed at six world championships. I placed second twice so I had definite potential for the Olympics."

"A beginner then?"

"Absolutely." I took another sip of my champagne. The balloon lurched again but this time I leaned into Jacques. "There was nothing I wanted more than an Olympic gold. That's all I dreamed of. Standing on that podium with the medal around my neck. I could almost taste it."

The sky deepened as the sun sunk. As we soared upwards, the only sound was the short sharp fires of the burner. "The day it happened I'd been at the rink since five that morning, practicing my routine. Over and over again. Same as any other morning. My coach watching from the side, shouting out her instructions, the usual. We'd raised the funding, secured some sponsorship, I was all set to go. That Olympic medal would be mine."

As I spoke, my throat burned, the words incinerating as they left my mouth. I'd never spoken about this. Not to anyone. I'd underlined that part of my life and fumbled about to find another goal. A safer goal.

Jacques's voice was soft. "You don't have to tell me about this if you're not ready to."

"If you googled it, you'd probably find out what happened. For some reason, that morning, I decided to try the triple axel. At that point, it hadn't been successfully executed at the Olympics. So, I just raced on out there and tried. It did not end well, as they say." I finished my champagne. "Thank you, that was delicious. More please."

Jacques took the glass from me but not before he kissed my cheek—a slow soft kiss. “I’m sorry that happened. Thank you for telling me.”

By the time the basket bumped back down to earth, night had crept in.

“That was lovely”, I said, realizing as I did that it sounded automatic, as if I were punctuating the end of a dutiful visit to a much loathed aunt. I reached forward and touched his arm. “No, really, that was lovely. I’m a nervous flyer, and I’m not going to lie, I was damn terrified, but that was a date I’ll never forget.”

Jacques eyes twinkled. “Who says it’s over?”

I removed my hand. Not that I wanted to. The whole flight duration, he’d stood just behind me, maybe an inch or so away. I could smell him, I could feel the heat of his body, but apart from that one kiss, he was just *that far* away from actually making contact with me. Anytime I fell backwards, he’d catch me, and resume his respectful distance. Well, I didn’t want respectful distance.

“It’s not over?” I glanced around. There was no restaurant that I could see. Maybe it was hidden somewhere?

He helped me out of the basket. The sudden solidness coupled with the champagne had my head swimming in different directions. I swayed. He steadied me.

“I’ve still got to get you back to your car.”

My heart sank. Was that all? Somehow I’d thought maybe we’d spend a bit more time together, getting to know each other, something. I couldn’t believe I’d told him about my accident. My own stupid, reckless fault had caused that accident, and I’d fessed up to him. I’d left out the bit about the fallout that ensued. Show and tell for another evening.

He held open the door for me, and I hopped in. As Jacques made his way round to the driver’s side, I wondered if perhaps I should ask him to dinner. Why not? He’d gone to all this trouble, I was an independent,

and successful woman, not quite in his realm of successful, but that didn't mean that I wasn't...close, heck, I was almost a partner—that had to count for something, right?

He got in.

“Jacques, I—”

“I wondered if—”

We both stopped talking and looked at each other.

Simultaneously: “No, you go first.”

Then laughed.

I spotted the gap. “I was wondering if maybe, if you've got a moment, perhaps, since it's late and all, maybe it would be good if we had something to eat?”

“That sounds like a good idea.” He started up the Land Rover, and eased it back out onto the road.

Silence. And then the eekety, squeakety of the Rover as it cavorted over the uneven surface.

Streetlights were an optional extra out here. And typically, the only source of light other than the Rover's rather dim headlights, was the moon, high up in the sky.

“How different it looks from down here, rather than from up there, in that basket.” I pointed to the moon. “I wouldn't mind doing that again, maybe in the middle of the day? Imagine what you'd be able to see over one of the game reserves.”

“Or even people's houses.”

“Haha. That's called spying.”

We turned up a short, dirt road, then towards a pair of giant iron gates.

I looked about me. This didn't look like the way back to Melrose Arch. Not at all.

Ahead, a series of lanterns created a path.

“As you suggested, how about some dinner?” Jacques pulled up in front of what looked like some sort of lodge. He parked and with some

trepidation, I climbed out the rover. A couple of *rondawel* chalets dotted the rural landscape. "Where are we?"

"Old friends of the family."

Oh well, that explained all of it, didn't it?

He ushered me into a reception that seemed ready to head for sleep. The proprietor, his handlebar moustache curling at the ends, read in an armchair, a Labrador laying at his feet. He spotted Jacques, abandoned the book and came over.

"*Goeienaand, good evening.*" He pumped Jacques' hand and beamed across at me. I beamed back. "Good to see you."

"Piet, this is Madge. Piet promised me he'd take care of everything."

"Known Jacques here since he was this high". Piet pinched his thumb and forefinger together. "He used to get up to all kinds of mischief."

"Don't lie, I never!" Jacques winked at me.

I stumbled past the Labrador that now demanded my attention, tail athump, and followed Piet and Jacques past a swimming pool towards where a table sat under the canopy of a leopard tree.

Chilled champagne sat in a bucket next to the table, fine silverware graced the place setting, and a vase of stargazers provided the centerpiece.

Piet wheeled over two domed trays and set them in front of us. "Any problems, I'll be back in the main house. I'll leave you two alone now."

He then disappeared back into the main reception area. Not two seconds later, the lights went out, plunging us into candle lit darkness. And silence. The kind of silence only the bush could bring, with the faint chirrup of crickets and the hum of insects. I took off my jacket. Any chill from being a few thousand meters skyward had dissipated and the night's warmth pulsed.

Pop! I jumped.

Jacques laughed. "Just champagne. Can I pour some for you?"

I nodded. "You really put all this together?"

"Guilty"

Underneath the tree, the stars, the sky, the venue would certainly get a five-star Yelp review. "It's lovely out here."

"Been coming out here since I was a boy." He handed me a glass. For a second, our fingers met. Electricboogiewoogiewonderland. "When my mom died, it was somewhere I could come and just forget about everything." He tapped his glass to mine, his brown eyes gazing straight through me. "Cheers. To date number one."

"Cheers." We drank. "When did your mom die?"

"When I was eighteen. Breast cancer. They did the whole mastectomy thing but it came back."

"I'm sorry. That's really rough."

He nodded. "Cancer's a bitch. Hit my dad hard."

"And you?"

"Miss her every day. She was always on my case about getting good grades and finishing my homework and doing well. But she was the kindest person I ever met."

I reached my hand to his, his fingers interlocking with mine.

He smiled. "She hated my bike too. Just like you."

"Hate's a strong word..."

We both sipped, our gaze connected. I dropped mine first. Could one look be that intense? My core contracted and started to burn. Yes, yes it could.

His tone shifted. "Madge Everson, tell me about your exciting life."

"Not much to tell. It's not as exciting as *your* life. Investing in companies, making lots of money, selling them on, fixing them up, driving around in fancy cars, taking out the help on hot air balloon rides--"

"Just for the record, you're the first woman I've taken up in a hot air balloon. And I don't date my staff, not now, not ever. If you'll recall, I did say that we would have our three dates after the deal was done. Not during."

I drained the rest of my champagne. "That's exactly what you said. I

didn't mean to imply." I put my glass down, but onto the cutlery rather than the flat surface of the table. The glass bounced over, clattering into my empty plate. It didn't shatter but it was enough to undo me.

"I don't know what seems to be wrong with me." It wasn't the champagne. It wasn't the date. Was it him? Why'd he have to be so... nice? He didn't have to go to all this trouble. Not for me. No-one really had before. And if they had, well, they hadn't stuck round, had they?

Fantastic. Shag. Was I still worried about what Sylvia had said?

"I'd say you're probably tired. Anyone who works crazy long hours like you do would be finished by the end of the year. Probably stress." Jacques picked up the glass, righted it, and filled it back up to the brim.

I nodded, smiled, and took another sip of my champagne. "Says he who works longer hours than I do."

He smiled. "Maybe we're more similar than you seem to think. But that's all set to change soon."

I let his words hang in the air.

We exchanged a glance.

"Don't know about you, but I'm starving." The domed lids revealed smoked salmon, buttered bread and cold asparagus. "Starters. Shall we?"

I picked up my knife and fork.

"Here try this," he said, feeding me the asparagus. "Good, right?"

I was acutely aware of the opening and closing of my mouth round the proffered asparagus. "Delicious. What do you mean 'change soon'?"

"I'm heading out of the business. Remember that little carpentry business I was talking about?"

Had I heard Jacques right? "You want to give up venture capital raising to be a carpenter?"

His eyes widened. "It's what I've always wanted."

A million and one thoughts rushed through me. Why? Where's the money? Why? Isn't that risky? *Why?*

He added: "It's like your skating career."

"How? I gave it up. It gave *me* up."

“But from what you told me, you practiced noon and night. It was your ‘thing.’”

I forked through my salmon. “Not anymore. I’m doing something that’s way more stable, more money, more opportunities. Investor relations is my ‘thing’ now.” I’d balk at calling it my passion, my love, my reason for getting up in the morning. Although, if I were honest, something drove me to head into Capitol Hill day in day out, weekends included.

He leaned forward as I digested my feelings about my job. “But you could skate again?”

I almost laughed out loud. “Not professionally. Definitely not at the Olympics.”

“For the love of it?”

I balked. “I haven’t done that since the accident.”

He stopped to take a mouthful. “You haven’t been back on the ice?”

Considering the night’s heat, I’d pay to be in the rink right now, not on it. “It’s dangerous.”

“But you loved it.”

I speared my asparagus—not quite the same as being fed the stuff. “It didn’t love me.”

He wiped away some butter from my chin with his napkin. Fantastic. Shag. I plunged in. “How old were you when you got married?”

“Too young. I knew Sylvia from school. We hung out together, we weren’t even an item, but when ma died, she was there. We went to university together and married after graduation. Twenty-two.”

I just stared at him. He continued. “It didn’t last. When you get married too young, when you don’t know who you are, there are problems.”

“Says he of twenty...what was it again?”

“A hundred and eleven.”

“Funny.”

“At last, she smiles. Finished with your starters?”

An eye meet that threatened to scorch my skin. Would I have any left before we even got to dessert?

Despite the deliciousness of the roast chicken dinner that had been prepared for us, I found I couldn't eat. Part of it was the heat, part of it was Jacques.

I didn't want the night to end; I wanted it to end right now.

"Carpentry, for me, is a trade that brings me closer to nature." Jacques explained: "When I was younger, I was very concerned about ecological problems, still am, and the issue of water looks like it's going to be the problem of the next few decades. I'm looking at investing in technology some engineering students at UCT have come up with. That way I can give back and give forward as well. It's my last deal with JVD."

I pushed a potato around my plate. "Perhaps we'll have to recycle our own sweat like they did in *Dune*."

He gazed at me a second. "I love that book."

"Seriously?"

"Who doesn't love that book?"

"My mother, for starters. She hates anything science fiction. She calls it 'that science fiction shit.'"

"I wouldn't have placed you as a sci-fi fan."

I yanked out my car keys that had a Doctor Who Tardis keyring. "Are you kidding? I love it. I'm the biggest nerd out there."

He looked at the keyring then at me. "Hey, you said it."

I mock-threw my napkin at him.

Jacques leaned forwards, his fingers pressed together. "Time for the important questions: *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*?"

"Why choose? Both."

Jacques sighed. "And this one for the clincher...*Firefly*?"

“Why did they cancel it? Why? It was like—”

“The best.”

“Exactly!” Jacques leaned forward. “I don’t think I’ve ever met a woman who’s watched *Firefly*.”

“Hanging out with the wrong women then, de Villiers.”

So *easy*.

But, steady. Calm down.

Each overlap could mean everything. Destiny. Fate. Love. Love in all its vividness as two souls found each other. Or it could mean two humans who had found common ground, not too impossible, not so unlikely. Or it could mean both. Or neither. It could be all or it could be nothing.

Champagne. I needed more champagne.

“And now a bit of dessert?”

I stretched my hands over my stomach. “I couldn’t.”

Jacques brought out a box of chocolate.

I relinquished. “I’m willing to make an exception.”

“Thought you might say that. Chocolate is the only acceptable form of dessert.”

“Isn’t it disappointing when the options are only fruit or custard?”

“Or ice cream. Unless it’s chocolate flavored. Here.” He chose one, moon-shaped, and reached over. At first, I tried to take it from him. He shook his head, took it away. He reached over again. This time I waited as he touched the chocolate to my lips and let him slide the chocolate into my mouth. He watched as I felt the gooey goodness melt down my throat. “Good?”

I looked up at him. And held my breath. Those deep brown eyes were gazing at my lips, then back at my eyes, back to my lips. That slithering slip of desire uncoiled in my groin and spiraled up my back.

“My turn.” Before I could move my hand away, he grasped it, brought it to his lips, and brushed them over my flesh. The feel of his stubble against my skin made me gasp aloud.

Did it matter if we did or didn’t make it through time together?

Wasn't this what living was all about? Taking the moments?

"Some coffee?"

"I don't see a pot."

"Not here." I waited for his explanation. Then I realized. This was where I should decline and say that I'd rather be driven home. This was that moment. I knew what I had to say. So simple. Yet. Yet. My whole body wanted to be entwined with his, devoured by his, I didn't want to let him out of my sight, not for a second.

Great in bed, that's what Sylvia had said. *Great*. Or was it *fantastic*? *Fantastic*. Shag.

Would I regret the decision? Maybe. Probably. But what if I didn't? What if he was the 'nice' man my mother harped on about?

My throat went dry. "Where?"

He pointed to the chalet just behind us. Of course. Part of me dislodged, disappointed. I hadn't read him wrong, not at all. This was about sex. Straight up and down lust. I could handle that, couldn't I?

I faltered. "Just coffee. Then you'd better drive me back."

"Just coffee." He helped me to my feet. I leaned against him. I'd drunk way way too much. He looked down at me, his hand resting in the curve of my waist. Yes, yes, this I wanted. Him. All of him. "Just coffee," he said again, relinquishing me.

No, no. I'd been so sure he'd kiss me. I wanted him to kiss me! To feel his mouth on mine, his hands pulling me towards him, those same hands as they traveled down my back, over my ass, down between my...

He held open the door of the chalet. I sauntered in.

Damn it. There really was a coffee pot. A coffee machine actually, and sugar and milk and all. Right slap bang in the center of the chalet, next to a rather quaint little sofa. As well as a bed. I tried not to look at it. Big, brass bed, nice and old-fashioned, puffed out pillows, quilted duvet. Bed. Bed. Bed. The word screamed aloud in my head.

Great in bed. Fantastic. In. Bed. Fantastic. Shag.

Jacques touched my elbow. It was all I could do not to drag him

straight into the center of that bed. Or not drag him there. "With cream? Or should we live dangerously and have the cappuccino?"

Stuff the damn cappuccino. But no, there he was, playing with those damn coffee pods, making me coffee. Exactly as he said he would. Damn it. A gentleman. *What the hell do you want Madge?* Did I even know?

I took him in as he busied himself. Tall. Broad. Those shoulders. Strong. Like a swimmer's. Lean hips. Long legs. Wedged alongside that body in that balloon? Solid. Hot.

"Here you go," he said, heading towards the couch. He handed me the coffee, then sat alongside me. Close. Turned inwards, towards me. But not close enough. Not as close as I'd like. It was the champagne. Had to be. Didn't it always do this to me? All those tiny little bubbles that burst any semblance of decency?

He smiled as he sipped. Those lips. Delicious. Deep kisser. One of those kisses that reached in and caressed at my soul. Not everyone could kiss. Ohno. But if you could find someone who knew just how much pressure, just how much lips, just how much tongue, well, you didn't let them go, did you? Would I let Jacques go? Would he even ever be mine to let go? What the hell was I even talking about?

"You look a million miles away."

"Right here," I answered. Coffee. I took a sip. "This is great."

What an inadequate response. The whole evening had been magical.

I paused. The bed loomed. Wasn't this where the wheels fell off?

He sat close, his thigh alongside mine. His heat. That same heat that had held me steady as the balloon had weaved and swayed. The same heat that jumbled up my thoughts, raced through my body yearning to be closer, closer, closer.

"My car might be locked in for the night."

He blinked.

"It happened once before. I left my car in the parking lot, went somewhere else in someone else's car and when we got back, the parking lot was closed. I didn't have a choice. I had to hitch a lift to my parents.

My house keys were in my car, you see. And I had to wake them at three in the morning. Only thing was, I then had to get up at five—can you imagine?—the next morning because my mom had offered to take Charlie somewhere and I had to tag along. I got my car back but then, I remember this now, I had to get to a pre-wedding hair appointment. I was one of the bridesmaids—and I was so tired and dying for a shower.”

Jacques blinked as I rambled.

He steadied my hand with his. “I will drive you back to your car. But I want to make one thing clear. I want to know you here.” He touched my head and then the space on my chest where my heart lay. “And here.”

Something in me unraveled. Of all the things he could have said, that was not what I was expecting. Of all the things he could have said, that was probably the last thing I knew how to deal with.

MADGE

Jacques pulled up alongside my car, which, contrary to my insistence, sat exactly where I'd left it the previous afternoon. Was it that long ago? The dash clock read 12:30.

"There you go. All safe and sound."

I looked about the near-empty parking lot. The 24/7 parking lot, as it turned out. Who knew? Jacques. He knew.

The whole long drive back, which seemed to be dogged by roadworks, broken traffic lights, and super slow vehicles which I itched to just push along with my bare hands, I'd run through various scenarios in my mind.

Had he meant what he said about wanting to know me? If he'd said it, he'd meant it. I knew that much from working with the man. I'd already relaxed around him, let my guard down, was that so bad?

Unchartered territory was what it was. And it terrified me worse than being deserted on a meter-squared island with a man-eating clown.

Option 1: Race out the car the second we arrived, no turning back? Looked tempting.

Option 2: Try and be friends? A cop out, safe option. We would drift apart almost immediately. But no-one would get hurt.

It wouldn't do though — those options didn't give me him. A wave of horror raced through me. Now that I had to enact one of those various scenarios, I clammed up. This was it. End of. Overs kadovers. Finish and

klaar. Time to cut off ties. Do the necessary.

“Thank you. For a lovely evening.” My voice caught. I had to just get out of there now, *right now*. Put as much distance between me and Jacques as possible.

He put his hand on my shoulder. I swallowed.

I turned towards him. His eyes sought mine. I dipped my gaze. Better to look at the seatbelt rather than get lost in him. And I would get lost in him. I always did. It couldn't be helped. Somewhere between yesterday afternoon and this morning, I'd already felt myself falling for him. Why was that supposed to be a good thing? No-one liked to fall, no-one threw themselves off a cliff without some form of parachute, some safety net. But in love there were no guarantees. No safety, just bumpety-bump as you crashed back into the earth. The cold, hard earth that reminded me never to think beyond its earthly realm again. Clouds were not for mere mortals.

Clouds were not for me.

His hand reached for my shoulder. “Don't go.” The words sounded soft, tempting.

Didn't he realize? I didn't *want* to go, I *had* to go. It was the only way.

“I want to kiss you good night.”

“Isn't it good morning, now?”

He exhaled long and loud, filling up the space between us, his voice soft and slow. “M-a-d-g-e.”

I forced my gaze to meet his. So close. For a second, I felt the tingling in my stomach, the flip-flop of excitement, that thrill of expectation. I wanted him, all of him. I pulled Jacques towards me and kissed him. A long kiss. A soul kiss. The type of kiss that reminded me why I'd ever agreed to hope again.

His hand moved across my face, into my hair, so soft, so...tender. Almost too much.

I made to pull away, but he held me against him. Held me and kept on with the kissing. Long kisses, slow kisses, the kind of kisses that I'd

read about, dreamt about. And that stroking of my hair melted me from the outside in. Or was that the inside out? When I could bear it no more, his lips parted from mine, his forehead resting on mine.

“You have no idea what you do to me.”

“It’s not intentional, I promise.”

“Maaadge.” A long pause. “Can I pick you up later for date number two?”

It wasn’t date number two I was worried about. It was date number four or five or six, if they happened.

I played with the varnish on my fingernails, stalling for time.

He stroked the side of my face with the back of his hand. “So beautiful, Miss Everson. Or is that, Ms. Everson? Don’t want to offend any feminist sensibilities.”

I beamed. “Ms. will do just fine.”

“I think Ms. will do just fine, too.” He leant over to kiss me again. This time, when I kissed him, I felt the heat rise in me, swift and persistent. Hot enough to make me want to haul him into his no-seat backseat and let nature run its heart-break, heat-soaked course.

I stopped him. “Wait—” One look at his face and I spoke hurriedly. “How about this afternoon, if you’re free? We could maybe meet at the park or something? It is a holiday, after all.”

“Thinking picnic?”

“Thinking that exactly. How about I organize, and meet you at Delta Park?”

“Or I could fetch you?”

I hesitated. *C’mon Everson, bit late for even thinking for a second that you have some sort of control here.* I gave up. “Or you could fetch me.”

“Done. Three? Four?”

“Three-thirty?”

“Compromise. I like. Three thirty then.”

“Great. Allergic to anything?”

He shook his head. “I’m easy.”

I smiled then and looked up at him from under my eyebrows. “Oh, I know *that*...”

JACQUES

I drove back to my place, showered, changed clothes and headed for the office. Public holiday or not, I had work that needed to be done. Not that the perks of entrepreneurship weren't legion, but the volume of work I had to put in to reap anything like a reward? Way *bladdy* more than most people understood. Great risk, work harder than I'd dreamt possible, and then, finally, limping over the hill towards reward. Then even more work. Even Christmas.

What would Madge be doing for Christmas? Too soon for a family lunch? Possibly. But, maybe. She confused me. One moment, she was right there with me, and then, just as suddenly, she'd become more distant than the other end of Siberia. But we had rapport, great conversation, great connection. And that kissing. I could get high on kissing her. Hell, she'd even referenced *Dune*. Now if that wasn't a sign, what was? Face it, de Villiers, you're hooked.

Now if only Madge felt the same way.

In the parking lot, I spotted my father's Fortuna bakkie. Ah, great minds and all. Good.

Finding Pa took less than a second.

"What number coffee's that?", I asked as he fumbled about in the office kitchen fridge for long life milk.

"Fourth," he answered, holding up a mug with 'World's Greatest Dad' imprinted in vast gold letters, most of which had scratched off in

the dishwasher.

I joined him in the kitchen. "It's been a few hours since my first cup of the day."

Pa raised an eyebrow. I busied myself, ignoring the inevitable questioning I'd invited. Was it possible to feel my father's gaze as I poured the remnants of the coffee pot into my mug?

I stumbled over my words. "Pa, how come you never married again after Ma?"

"Ah." He rocked back on his feet. "Now he asks."

"Well?"

"It's difficult to find that kind of trust again. Love—now love, that's easy. But trust—that's more difficult. I don't need to tell you how many opportunists see all of this," he gestured to the vast empty offices that had his name on the building, "and sometimes it's difficult to know what's real and what's not. I think you know this story."

A pause.

Didn't I know that just too well?

Pa took a sip of his coffee. "I went over to the flower farm the other day. Gert Mampoer said you took that comms woman from the agency there."

"Jaaa?"

"Jaaa, so is there something you want to tell me?"

I met my father's gaze. "Not exactly."

Pa shrugged and started to make his way back to his office. "Sure? I also spoke to Piet about heading up out to the lodge after Christmas."

I couldn't move a muscle without one of Pa's spies reporting back. "Sounds good."

"And he tells me you brought a lady friend up there last night."

I shook my head. "Seems you should have been in the espionage industry."

"Aren't I, though? How else is the company so successful? Intelligence, I tell you. You've never taken someone up to the lodge

before. Not after your divorce. Are you serious about her?"

"Early days."

"I'm happy for you." Pa continued: "Not all women are like Sylvie. Remember *that*."

I bristled. "I know." Deep down I knew that, but sometimes I wasn't so sure.

"Nothing wrong with taking a chance on someone else. At your age, you should. You can't hide behind all this, all the time."

"I know, Pa, I know."

"Good." He slapped my shoulder. "Bring through those figures for that leather goods company. I want to make sure the projections are sound."

I nodded and headed for my own office. Pa called after me: "Sometimes you just have to jump and wait see."

"With the leather goods?"

"Funny man."

Wasn't that the truth?

"Thanks, Pa," I said as he vanished behind his office door.

I settled in behind my desk. The work didn't seem to flow though. If Madge and I had any chance at a future, I had to tell her about Sylvia—all of it. People didn't just get divorced. And our divorce had been difficult, prolonged, and unpleasant. Sure, we were civil now. But that had taken time and a lot of compromise.

How did something that started as love end up as something quite different?

Didn't you just meet someone, say 'hey, I like you' and get on with it? Why did there have to be hidden agendas...baggage? I shuddered.

I'd have to mention Sylvia. Sooner, rather than later.

My screensaver bounced up and down. No work today.

Spreadsheets, projections and reports would have to wait. I gathered my keys and headed back out the building.

It didn't take me long to get to my workshop. The one that I'd told

Madge all about on that first date. The one that would be my future.

The door creaked open.

Ah yes, hello my old friend. I stepped inside and felt the workings of my mind gear down. Nothing quite like the feel of my hands on solid wood — molding it, forming it, unleashing the function within — to get back in the moment. I ran my hand over my worktop which waited for me.

Wood chippings littered the floor. Tools hung from the walls.

So it was more of a remodeled garage, than a workshop. Not that I cared. This was where I could take off my business suit and get in touch with my inner demons. Work them out, so to speak.

The urge to create ached at me. For her.

Wait...did I want to make something for her? Yes, that's exactly what I wanted—to share this part of myself with her. *Yirre.*

A piece of mahogany waited propped up against the wall. Good for a table? Maybe one or two custom-made dining room chairs?

Nope, nope, no good. It had to be for her.

Loveseat? Too much.

What did she love? Skating. Wooden skates maybe or a skateboard? Skateboard? What was I, seventeen? She had a thing for order. A wooden filing cabinet or in-tray didn't feel right either. Why not give her a *blerrrie* vacuum cleaner then?

Something...special.

Interlocking rings in different woods, bangle-style? Nah, not right either.

I picked up an abandoned notepad and started sketching a plan. This was who I was. A guy who liked to work with his hands, head out into nature on the back of his bike, and make furniture. What was wrong with that? If you were Sylvia, everything. And if you were Madge?

Would Madge accept me for the man I was, not the man I could become or the man I'd been?

MADGE

“Are you going to spill or what? When you called I thought something huge had happened.” Charlie curled up on my couch.

“Feet, Charlie!” I gesticulated at Charlie’s shoes.

“Come on, Madge.” She took off the offending shoes and put her feet up on my coffee table instead.

I gave up. “Do you do that at everyone’s house? Or just family?”

“Wow, and will you look at that holiday spirit, ladies and gentlemen.”

“Sorry, you just wouldn’t believe what, I mean, we went out and it wasn’t like I thought and—”

Charlie held up her hand. “Whoa, back up, what are you talking about? *Who* are you talking about?”

I couldn’t quite meet her eye. “Jacques.”

“Not I’ll-never-be-caught-dead-with-him-again-in-public, Jacques? Not Jacques, ohmygod, he goes for *dops* with his mates, and is all ‘sun’s out, guns out’, Jacques? Seriously?”

I huffed. “Okay, so maybe I’ve revised my opinion—”

“Revised your opinion? Give me the details. He’s cute — I know he’s cute — I was so sure you two would hit it off.”

“Really? Why’d you say that?”

“Obvious,” scoffed Charlie, leaning forward so as not to miss a single juicy salacious detail. I waited for her to oblige with the details about our

'obvious' compatibility. But no, she just looked at me, expectant like a dog spotting a squirrel. Clearly no explanation was forthcoming.

I threw out a scrap. "We went out yesterday."

"*And?*" Charlie picked up one of my cushions and hugged it to her. "Come on, Madge, give me the goss. I know that look. You like this guy. You're doing the whole mushy thing."

"Am so not." Am so too. Could Charlie read the expression on my face? Oh God—could Jacques? Would he know exactly how deep into the mush pool I was actually falling?

Charlie asked the question I dreaded. "Do you think he feels the same?"

"I *don't* know. What if he doesn't?"

"But what if he does?"

"But what if he doesn't?"

Charlie fixed me with a look. That look that reminded me of our mother. That look that told me I was being ridiculous. Same look she got when she said that 'no, she didn't want to go to university, she wanted to run a magazine empire'. Ho hum. Well, wouldn't Charlie be panicky as well if she'd had the dating past I'd had?

But Charlie was away with the hearts and the flowers and the handmade Valentine's wishes that burned bronze with impossible promises. "I'm so happy for you, Madge. This is fabulous news. And Jacques's fabulous. I always thought he was one of the nicest guys I ever met. Couldn't quite understand why he was still single."

"So why not introduce him to your sister? Excellent idea."

That look again. "Like I would introduce you to some low life douche?"

I thought back on that first date with Jacques. That's *exactly* what I'd thought of him.

"He's not your usual type, which is good. Your usual type is usually the wrong type. You need to find a good guy, one who's interested in you."

“Who says he’s interested in me?”

Charlie crossed and re-crossed her legs, her feet pattering across my table. I’d have to get out the Mr. Min after she left. “Madge, are you seeing him again?”

I nodded. “Yep, later this afternoon.”

“Does he text you?”

“Sends me some WhatsApps.”

Charlie nodded her head. “Yeah, you’re right, totally not interested in you.”

“He seems interested *now*, but you know what happens—”

“What? What happens? You fall in love, get married, and live happily ever after? Did I miss something?”

“But he might leave—”

“He might, and if you keep talking like this, he’ll be gone before he’s even here. Why would he want to leave you, Madge? You’re beautiful, intelligent, self-sufficient, independent, what else does some schmo want?”

“A young someone. I’m way older than him.”

“Age doesn’t matter.”

“Unless you’re Madonna, it does. Besides, he can have anyone.”

“Why would he want anyone, if he can have you? I think you like this guy and you’re making excuses.”

“Hey—”

“Was that blunt? My bad.”

The freight train of doubt chugged through my mind. Yes, he’d said those words. I want to know you here and here — heart and head. A little shiver ran through me.

Great in bed. Fantastic in bed. Fantastic. Shag. Whyohwhy, had I suggested Sylvia for comms? Why? Because, she was the best. Hmmm.

I couldn’t resist asking though. “What made you think we’d hit it off?”

Maybe it was because we were both independent corporate warriors,

both successfully navigating those ambitious waters, both committed to our professional goals.

“You always liked that Camel man look, rugged, adventurous, when we were younger. And here’s your very own Camel man, sort of. Without the smoking.”

“When have you seen me date anything of the sort?” I tried to recall what she was on about. A vague memory of a man in a khaki outfit who mountaineered down the side of some temple, before plunging headlong into a jungle. But that was when I was about fifteen or so? No-one dated Indiana Jones. Or took him home to the family. Besides, Jacques was not that kind of guy, not by a long shot. The bike, the land rover, the hot air ballooning, oh dear, maybe he *was* that kind of man?

And what would I do with that kind of guy, who was always on some sort of adventure? I did not do adventure. Charlie’s feet squeaked over the table again. I’d really have to polish that spot like a demon to get those marks out.

I spat it out: “But he was married to Sylvia.”

“No way! He’s the asshole? Really?” Charlie started laughing.

“It’s not funny. And, well, she’s still around.”

“Yeah, and you’ve gone out with her plenty. Does she cheat on her girlfriends?”

“No, but—”

“Then no but. What you bringing over for Christmas lunch? Think you’ll invite Jacques?”

“Hardly. We just met.”

“About three months ago...”

“...but we don’t really know each other.”

“Yeah, totally,” said Charlie. “Think mom will like him?”

“She doesn’t like any of my boyfriends.”

“Boyfriend? He’s a boyfriend now?” Charlie took a swig of her coffee, and then put the mug back down on my table— without a coaster. “Whatever. I’m going to be doing the dessert.”

“I said I’d do roast potatoes.”

My phone pinged.

“Speak of the devil—it’s her Sylvia.” I turned my screen towards my sister. “Had an amazing time the other night. We should do it again. How about after Christmas? Smiley face, kissy face.”

Charlie tilted her head. “She’s his ex-wife. *Ex* being the operative word here. If he wanted to be with her, she would be wife, no ex factor.”

I fiddled about with my coaster.

“You should take him skating with you. Wow him with your moves.”

I chucked the coaster at her. “I’m not getting back on the ice.”

Charlie caught it, and shoved it under her mug, sending coffee dribbling down into a small puddle. Using her sleeve, Charlie wiped at the coffee, before taking another sip. “Are you interested in this guy or not?”

I recognized the sharpness of tone. It stung like bitter lemon on an open wound.

“Yes, okay, I’m interested in him.”

“Then you better open up a bit. Skating was like your whole life for a long time. And besides that, you love it. You were always the first to be out there doing God knows what fandangled things, those spin things, and with your leg behind your head.”

“Called a Biellmann spin. But it’s not like who I am now. And dad will never forgive me.”

“Sometimes you’ve got to lay the ghosts of the past to rest. Time to deal, sis.”

Yeah, whatever.

“Think I should do something with chocolate or fruit salad?” asked Charlie, changing the subject.

“Chocolate. Obviously.”

“Ask him anyway.”

Definitely not. Parents didn’t need to get involved. Look how supportive they’d been of Charlie and Brian. As subtle as a wrecking ball

in their disapproval. No, thank you. Besides, it was still early days. In fact, the thought of introducing Jacques to my parents made my blood run cold with panic. Too much, too soon, way, way too much.

It would be a case of my worst hits played out over and over in the name of getting-to-know-you. No, thank you. Parents and romance didn't mix, especially not mine.

Whose parents actively encouraged not getting married? Not falling in love? Not hooking up at all? Mr and Mrs Miserably Married and not in love and alas, hooked up Everson.

I'd just handle date number two. That much I could deal with.

Fantastic. Sha—

“Stop thinking about her.”

“I'm not.

“Don't lie. He likes you. He's already passed on her, 'kay?”

What did Charlie know? Absolutely nothing.

MADGE

Camel man. My sister's words rang in my ears, as I tried to ignore my date's choice of outfit. Put him in the middle of the bush, and he'd be right at home. Camel man, really? My fourteen-year-old self had nursed that crush, not sensible adult me who preferred men who believed in the tailored look. Still, a familiar wave of lust had stabbed at me when I saw him in his casual jeans and khaki shirt. Clearly my libido had no idea what I really, truly preferred.

This time, he'd fetched me in a Mercedes. An SLK—of course—heaven forbid it was a normal family sedan style car or one of those little run around cars like I drove. No, no, it had to be something upmarket, something that people stared at as he flew by—like that Ferrari.

What else did he have hiding away in his garage? Helicopter perhaps? Small army? I thought of my little townhouse, 'little' being the operative word. Did he live in some palatial splendordome somewhere on the West Rand or something? Did they even have mansions out there?

For a second, my mind wandered over to what his bedroom might look like. Mirrored ceilings? Shag-pile carpets? Black satin sheets? Epic cheesiness?

Then I backtracked. Was it the same home he'd lived in with Sylvia? Was it their old bed? Did her photos still line the shelves?

Fantastic. Shag. Why was there a devil on my shoulder called Sylvia? Did it have an off switch? Apparently, not, because manohman it did not

stop with the commentary. Fantastic. Shag. Fantastic. Shag. Yeah, yeah, I got it with all the technicolor imagery I could picture.

Sylvia's unanswered text loomed in my chat list. I'd get round to answering her...tomorrow.

I'd managed to get into Food Lovers Market before they closed. What the hell did I get for a picnic? If there was one thing I wasn't, it was dedicated to the stove, cooker or anything to do with the kitchen. Isn't that what Food Lovers was for? Instant meals?

I'd managed to squeeze my carrier bags into the space that passed for a backseat in Jacques's car. At least nothing else was going to be happening in that backseat – no room. Just the thought of being squeezed into that space with Jacques sent the blood to my groin. When he'd kissed me hello, his lips had lingered on mine, his hand firm against my back, his chest pushed towards mine, as he pulled me close. Part of me wanted to skip the picnic altogether.

Bed was doable. Heart and head? Not so much.

"Delta Park. Interesting choice," he said, as he made his way through the almost deserted streets of the Northern Suburbs. With Christmas a week to go, most of the residents had upped and fled to the coast.

We chose a spot near the road that looked out over the plane of green, stretching out towards the tree-lined *spruit*, a narrow creek running through the park. Dogs cavorted back and forth hunting the *hadeda birds* that padded along.

I took control—I'd got this.

First, I rolled out my picnic blanket, a reversible, checkered affair with a waterproof base. Then I yanked out two cushions and tossed them onto the blanket.

"Fancy," said Jacques, watching me.

"Some people like roughing it, but I prefer to have some of the modern day comforts." I took out a chopping board, a knife, two glasses, butter knives, a baguette, pâté, strawberries, half a rolled ham, a slab of chocolate, biltong, a packet of cream cheese, orange juice, and a bottle of

sparkling wine.

Jacques pointed to the wine. "We could get thrown out for that."

"Live dangerously", I replied, thinking that was probably as dangerous as I could get.

Jacques' fingers grappled with the metal casing at the top of the bottle, his solid fingers negotiating the twisted metal in two movements. He discarded the casing, turning his attention to the bottle's neck. He began to nudge the cork forwards with his thumb, the bubbles underneath rushing upwards with each coaxing movement. I swallowed as Jacques caught me watching him. He winked. I blushed and turned away. A faint pop sounded as the cork surrendered.

I leapt to my feet. "We'll need to rinse the cups."

"Wait." Jacques caught my hand in his. I dragged my eyes upwards. "You'll miss the sunset."

He let go of my hand. I sunk back onto the bench. My heart hammered as he sat close to me, close enough that I could smell the lemon in his aftershave, smell the warmth of his skin. Had it only been last night—no, this morning—that I had kissed him like I'd wanted to dissolve into him, his flesh molding against mine?

The sunset would take a while to wind down entirely. But for now we had sky porn of orange, pink and red that would make a chameleon blush. Romantic? Sure, if I liked that kind of thing. I did, I did. Two magical sunsets in a row! All of this romance would set the expectations bar far higher than I could reach. If we could lay here, me propped against him, him whispering sweet nothings, then—

"Have you ever played that game before, when you stand in the center of a group of people, and then you close your eyes, and let yourself fall?"

What was he on about? "Game?"

"They love it at team building events."

"I always try to miss those things."

"Really? You didn't strike me as the type to duck and dive." He

handed me a plastic cup of wine.

“We’re in competition. There is no team building, not really.”

Jacques lifted an eyebrow as he chomped down on a strawberry, the fruit staining his lips. What was better than Jacques’s lips? Jacques’s strawberry-tinged lips.

I swallowed my wine. “We’re all in teams, yes, but the teams all compete against each other. If a prospective client comes in, best you hope that you’re the one to get the call, otherwise one of the other teams will get the deal.”

“But your team works together?”

I shook my head. “Ah, no. We all work on different accounts for different team leaders. So, it’s easy to be nailed, as it were, by one of your own team members. Take your project, for example. I ran it because you asked for me, but Nomfundo worked on that account with me, while she was also working on other projects for the other team leaders. If they needed her, I ended up without help.”

Jacques began making swift work of tearing apart the baguette. “But you all work for the same organization?”

“Correct. But nothing gets everybody motivated like a bit of competition.”

“You don’t trust your colleagues, then?”

I cackled. “Good God, no.”

“And there I thought comms was all about the friendly. *Yirre.*”

“Ha!” I snorted. “If only you knew how cutthroat it is. The one partner, Bill, got me to pitch for one of his clients. Limited resources, he claimed. Well, I pitched, then had to do the follow-ups and wrote the dummy articles that secured the business. Did I get the billing? Forget that.”

“What’s the boss say?”

“Who do you think keeps putting the referrals through to the other partners? I’ve had fourteen clients this year. *Fourteen.* I’ve run myself ragged being at their beck and call.” Jacques tilted his head. I

backtracked. "I had no problem with you or any other of my clients."

"Except perhaps in flower farms."

I felt the blush. "Except for flower farms."

Jacques spread a whack of pâté onto a hunk of bread and handed it to me. "That's very sad."

Pâté got stuck to the top of my mouth. More wine. "It's the industry, I suppose."

"I wondered why you seemed so jumpy about things, but with your colleagues as competitors, I guess it makes sense. *He who controls the spice* —"

"— *controls the universe*. Exactly."

We ate in companionable silence. Jacques poured some more wine. "And you've been in IR how long?"

I didn't have to think about it. "Six years, give or take." Six long years that in retrospect, didn't seem like six years at all. All that time had flown by. At six years and counting, I was *way* up for partnership. Hadn't Monty come in below me, with less experience, and fewer clients, and already been made associate partner? I frowned. Yeah, he'd definitely only been there four years or so, and no way had he brought in more revenue than me. Heck, now that I thought about it, hadn't all the team leaders made their way into some sort of partnership arrangement? All of them, except me.

I brooded about my role at Capitol Hill Investor Relations. How come I'd been passed up? I was supposed to have my meeting with Mr. Boss Man when I returned to work on Monday, right before he disappeared leaving me in charge of the office for the dreaded Christmas slump.

I was still short of my work target. Not that short but *short*. Short did not equal targets met or targets exceeded.

I'd make partner right?

Jacques finished the rest of the baguette and was now slicing into the ham. "Did you start there after the skating?"

"Not immediately. I had to finish my degree which I'd neglected."

Those years stared back at me like a burnt out wasteland. No money, my father's huge disappointment, a sinking depressive state that had me battling to get out of bed each morning.

"I'm sure you aced it."

I opened my mouth to lie and found the truth jumped out. "I flunked my first two years. I had to sit before a panel and defend my right to remain at the university. Not my finest moment."

"Must have been difficult."

"Says the winner of the finance prize three years running."

Jacques went very quiet. "I'd lost my mom. Work seemed like the best place to lose myself."

Our eyes met. This time the slow burn ignited something else, something deeper.

I looked away. "It's easier to focus on work than anything else."

"It'll still be there tomorrow. It's predictable, more or less, particularly something like finance. Get this degree, do well, join an investment house, work your way up. *Ja*, the markets are unpredictable but the job progression less so."

His words hung there. Wasn't that exactly why I'd chosen investor relations? Its relative samey-sameness? A little more exciting than accounting and a whole lot less exciting than joining the circus? Or say, ice skating?

"How did you get into raising money for other companies? That seems less predictable."

He smiled. "Ironically, my mother's death is what gave life to my own venture. She left me a lot of money and I wanted to make a difference to smaller companies with sound ethics—build them up and make them sustainable."

A lump caught somewhere in my throat. What was my reason for making partner? Money. Prestige. A picture of success. I hung my head. Seconds ago it had seemed such a worthwhile pursuit. Now? I toyed with a strawberry, twisting and pulling out the stalk.

I took a deep breath, damn near sucking in the entire park. “Why are you giving it up then?”

“Because it sucks up all my time. Because I want something more to life than looking at spreadsheets and being interviewed by Marius Willemse.”

“You handled him like a pro.” I joked. “Have you ever considered investor relations as a career option?”

“I hear the clients can be demanding,” he teased, stroking the side of my face. A wave of emotion swelled over me. Part of me wanted to bask in his affection, the other part wanted to retreat with shame. I’d plunged into my career to paddle as far away from the grief of my broken skating dreams as possible. What I hadn’t considered was whether or not it was what I wanted, *really* wanted, to the exclusion of everything else. Like love.

He moved away his hand and scooped out the rest of the pâté. “What about starting your own thing?”

I chewed on a mouthful of bread while I let Jacques’s suggestion digest. “My own business?”

“Why not? You’ve got the skills, the experience—”

“No clients—”

“They’ll follow you.”

“Said with such confidence. Look, this might be your area of expertise, but entrepreneurial things are really not me.” Not that I hadn’t thought about it before. I had. Many times. Maybe even doing a bit of consulting. I shook my head. “Besides, I should make partnership. I’m only just off target.”

“In terms of revenue?”

“Yep, it’s been a tough year. It shouldn’t hurt my chances though. I’ve worked like a machine to hit my numbers.” I could feel the flush at my naked ambition. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

He leaned forward and wiped away a crumb from my cheek. Just the single motion of his flesh brushing against mine, made my body begin to

simmer.

My voice cracked. “What happens after they’re in the circle? During the team building game?”

Jacques’s deep brown eyes looked into mine. “The person in the center of the circle falls, and trusts one of the circle to catch them.” He reached for my hand, interlacing my fingers in his. There could be no question—everything about me wanted this man, all of him.

“And do they catch them?”

“Always.”

Everything about the look I gave him suggested the opposite. But if there was one man who might catch me when I fell, it could be this one.

I squeezed his hand that still held mine. “You know, that sun’s going to disappear soon, and they’ll kick us out of here...”

Jacques sighed. “What should we do?”

I reached forward and kissed him. He tasted of wine and pâté, and heat. His hands cradled my face as he kissed me back. This time there was no doubt. In between kisses, I said the words that no longer scared me. “Take me back to yours.”

MADGE

His place was a tidy one-up one-down cluster home. No shag pile or mirrored ceilings in sight.

Grabbing a hold of his shirt, I pulled him towards me. Was kissing always this good? My lips moved over his, my tongue meshed with his. Too delicious.

“Thought we were taking this slow,” he mumbled between kisses.

“I changed my mind.”

“You’re sure? You want some coffee, tea, hot chocolate—”

He reached forwards, taking my head in his hands, and kissing me. Not softly, nor measured but hard, desperate, hungry.

I took a split-second to kiss him back. My hands shot to behind his head, over his shoulders, pulling him towards me. *Oh, yes.* I inhaled his scent, feeling it ignite a trail of passion in me. How I wanted him, here, now. My knee slid between his legs, as his hand reached upwards over the top of my thigh.

I knew what I had to do, what I wanted to do. And it had to be me—my choice, my decision.

His hungry mouth kissed my neck. I pulled away and looked him in his eyes. There could be no mistake in the invitation there.

My hand in his, he led me up to his bedroom, an all-masculine affair with stone-grey sheets and clean lines.

“This is alright?” He switched on the bedside lamp that fanned out a

dim light. Enough for me to see him. For him to see me.

With measured calm, I unzipped my jeans, and stepped out, before unpeeling my shirt. He didn't seem to draw breath as he watched. I liked the way he looked at me, his eyelids half-closed, the gap between his lips quivering. I shook out my hair that spread over my shoulders. Then, never taking my eyes off him, I turned, head tilted, my fingers moving towards my bra strap, unclipping it.

Naked from the waist up, my breasts naked, exposed, I turned towards him. His eyes devoured me, running up and over my flesh as I'd hoped he would, dreamt they would. "So, so beautiful." His finger reached out, traced over my hips, up towards my left breast, up over its fullness, resting on my nipple. I couldn't stop a groan.

Then he reached for me, pushing me down onto the bed, letting me fall into its softness as he climbed over me. "I want to worship you."

I shivered. From him, his words, or the breeze on my nakedness?

Again, he kissed me. His tongue moved in and out of my mouth in such tender roughness. I arched my body towards him. I knew I was wet. I could feel it, feel that hot, wet warmth. With hurried hands, I started to unbutton Jacques's shirt, while he fumbled with his belt.

"Off, off," I demanded, between kisses.

Jacques smiled as he hovered above me. "No patience."

His shirt fell off, revealing a torso that rippled with muscle. It was my turn to catch my breath. That he should be so gorgeous seemed unfair.

"Wait now, wait", he whispered, as he slowly undid his belt buckle, drawing his belt out and off, draping the leather across my almost naked body. He spent a little longer trailing the tip over the waistband of my panties, pulling at the elastic.

Then he climbed out of his pants, his erection free of their boxers. Hard. Ready.

I moved to touch him, but he gathered my hands up in his, and pulled them over my head. "Let me enjoy you."

His tongue ran a trail down to my breast, catching the nipple between

his teeth. I groaned and ground my hips upwards. Alternately catching and releasing my nipple, he teased me.

“Please, please.”

Gently he turned me over, his hand trailing down over the curve of my bottom. His hand then burrowed under my panties and between my legs, finding the hot nub at their meet and rubbing it. “Do you like that?” he whispered, kissing my shoulder. Did I, did I...? I nodded, feeling the beginning of an orgasm building. Never stopping his pressure, he slid his fingers inside me and I widened my legs.

I felt the warmth of his breath on my shoulder as his fingers worked me.

“We’ve got all night,” he murmured, as he removed his hand and slid my panties off. I tensed a little. “Please, please come inside me. You’re so gorgeous. Let me please you. How can I please you?”

He eased me onto my back, his fingers finding their way back into my center. *Ohman*, I couldn’t remember when— if ever—I’d wanted someone this much. Again, I moved towards him. This time he kissed me, his hardness resting just on top of my mound. I pushed my hips upwards and rolled against him until the tip of his erection was pushing at my entrance.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

He moved away from me. I heard the opening of a condom wrapper, and then he was inside me. Full, hard, to the hilt, filling me up so slowly, I thought I would pass out. And then he pulled away, almost out, wait—oh, that wait—then he drove into me again and then pulled away.

“Jacques, please,” I said, grabbing his buttocks, trying to keep him there.

He kissed me gently, wrapped his arms round me, and then, like we’d been together forever, we found our rhythm, in sync.

The pleasure rose up and up out of me, spreading and tingling through every fiber in my body. And he was with me, holding me,

sharing himself with me, his lips kissing, kissing, kissing me.

He groaned. "Ms Madge Everson" Another deep soul kiss. "Who'd have thought?"

Not me. If I could lie like this forever, him next to me, then I might never ever get up. My body flooded with pleasure-filled calm. Holy. Shit. This was it. The real deal. A jolt. What the hell was I thinking? This was just sex. Great sex. But just sex.

Great in bed. Fantastic in bed.

Mr. Fantastic. Shag.

This is what he was good at. Hadn't I had a thumbs up, five-star referral?

I landed back to earth with a bump.

Jacques pulled me close towards him. His kisses continued down over my neck, nuzzling into the space where it met my shoulder. "Beautiful, beautiful."

His legs intertwined with mine as he promptly fell asleep.

I lay there a long while listening to the sound of Jacques's breathing.

JACQUES

It was the sound of the rooster that did it. I'd been dreaming about a certain beautiful woman with caramel-colored hair who smelt like cinnamon and jasmine. She'd been about to wrap her long, shapely legs round me when I heard the crow.

I woke with a start. What the hell was crowing that? Above me, the roof thatching seemed to be teeming with the sound of birds clawing. The same rooster perhaps? Hadn't happened before.

Sunlight streamed through the window.

A sigh from next to me. Madge. The duvet swaddled round her hips.

Not so much a dream as an undreamt of reality. I'd had a feeling that still waters might well run deep with Madge — I hadn't been disappointed. What a revelation!

Look how she slept - like an angel. A half-smile on her lips, her breasts partially hidden by her arms, and the curve of her waist as it disappeared under the covers.

I'd be the first to admit, I hadn't expected this. Not so soon. Not at all, if truth be told. Maybe, if I was lucky, I'd get to kiss her under the moon. How romantic. Who, me? I was turning into a regular *blerrie* Valentino, hearts and flowers and all.

But here I was, here she was, next to me—naked next to me —after a night that jeez, I couldn't believe that we'd known each other for so short a time. For me, it felt like I'd known her forever. She was so easy to talk

to, and to, *yirre*...making love to her had felt like the most natural thing in the world. Making love? *Ja*, Jacques, now where did that come from?

The same place that wanted to know her inside and out, what made her tick, wanted the answer as to why she'd help push a car out of a ditch but not trust a colleague.

Another sigh from beside me. This was one lady who seemed content.

I could just watch her all morning. But just watching her made me hard, harder than I'd ever been with anyone. Man, she could make me ache for her in ways I didn't know existed.

She looked so peaceful, but, I just couldn't resist. I reached for her. That slight-smile of hers appeared again. My finger found one of her nipples and began to circle it.

Madge's breathing deepened. Another sigh.

I slid my hand over her waist, resting it in the curve there, feeling the velvety softness of her skin.

"Morning," whispered Madge, eyes half-open. Was it possible anyone could look that desirable waking up? I neither knew nor cared. I just wanted her. Now, *right* now.

I kissed her top lip, then her bottom lip. Madge pulled me towards her. Yes, just like that. I kissed her, rolling on top of her, feeling that softness beneath me.

And once more I was caught up in her, moving against her, inside her, feeling us becoming one all over again. Hot. Damn. This was one wild ride. I never could have dreamt just how passionate the seemingly prim Miss Everson was. Sorry—Ms. Everson.

"*Yirre*," I groaned. "What are you doing to me?"

For a second, she looked panicked. I reached to kiss her, softly this time, lingering. Gentle caresses. What a perfect start to the day. Maybe a shower for two, then a leisurely breakfast, and then, well, maybe some more time getting to know each other? Glancing at her sprawled out alongside me made me ache with longing. I could definitely get to know her again and again.

A rooster crowed again. "What the hell is that?" But Madge was already scrambling over the side of the bed.

"My alarm."

"You have a rooster crowing?"

"Doesn't everyone?" Her hair fell in all shapes around her face, that beautiful perfect face. "It's my neighbor's. He's got chickens." She'd found her phone and was intent on pushing all the right buttons. And she hadn't shifted the sheet round her bare breasts either. Interesting. She certainly pushed all of my right buttons.

I rested my arms behind my head. "When you going to show me how to skate? I'm free this morning. C'mon, give a guy a break."

"Yeah, that's probably exactly what will happen. Skating isn't for sissies, you know."

"I love it when you talk dirty."

"Maybe you'll get lucky?"

I raised an eyebrow at that. "Haven't I already?"

She flushed. "There's an open session all day on Saturdays. Think you can handle the pressure?" Not waiting for an answer, she dumped the phone down. "How about that coffee then? You did offer me coffee, tea, hot chocolate, right?"

"Coming right up."

A flush had spread over Madge's chest. That seemed to be one satisfied lady. I pulled my jeans back on before I headed for the kitchen—if I could make it that far. Maybe, just once more, before... I lunged towards her.

"Coffee!" she laughed, kissing my forehead, her fingers running through my hair. "And then we can get to business."

"Yes, ma'am."

Coffee, coffee, coffee. Maybe a little toast as well? Or croissants? I was pretty sure I had some in the freezer. Wouldn't take too much effort to heat some up in the oven. Or maybe I could whip up a frittata or some poached eggs on toast? Impress her with my mad cooking skills.

Happy as a pig in manure, I plonked a pod into the machine and waited for it to plink down into my designer mugs.

That's when the front doorbell rang.

What the *vok*? Saturday morning? Probably some trustee from the governing body. If there was some problem in the complex, it would be on a Saturday morning. Last *blerrrie* thing I needed.

I sloped over and swung the door open.

The smile died on my lips. Sylvia looked immaculate but didn't she always? A familiar lurch in my heart that this time didn't quite meet the same way it once did.

"Good morning, sunshine." She moved past me into the hallway, a cloud of perfume in her wake, a folder in her hand. "I see you've still kept the Persians. Nice."

Trust her to notice the *décor*. Madge hadn't made a single comment.

"I don't remember inviting you in, Sylvia." I nodded towards the open door. "It's not a good time. You're going to have to leave."

"It won't take a minute..."

"Jacques?" Madge, wrapped in my sheet, emerged. Talk about timing.

"Madge?" Sylvia's eyes widened, then narrowed. "There's a surprise."

Madge looked from me to Sylvia and back again. "You and me both."

"I was just leaving." Madge vanished back in the direction of my bedroom.

"Madge - wait. Just wait." A quick warning to Sylvia. "Don't touch anything." I fled after Madge. How was this unraveling so fast? Two seconds with Madge, and it would be sorted again. Of all the times for Sylvia to pitch up—

I bumped into Madge, bee-lining back out of my bedroom. In quick time, she'd flung on her jeans, and t-shirt, her shoes in her hand.

"Madge, it's not what it looks like. Really, she—"

"Looks like? What are you saying? Look, I get it, I do. You two have a

'friends with benefits' thing going or something. It's not like we're exclusive. Three dates, right? I don't want to be involved with whatever else you've got going on."

"Wait! Will you just sit down, just for a moment?"

Madge didn't sit, but she didn't leave either. Jeez, what a morning. From heaven to hell with the ring of a doorbell.

"Sylvia and I were married, true. It was years ago and it didn't work out. But there's something else. We—"

"Don't worry about it, Jacques. I don't want to know, and I don't need to know."

She headed out the bedroom. No, no, no.

Sylvia had made herself very much at home, sunk into the couches, sipping at the coffee I'd made for Madge. Just like Sylvia. "Hey hun, don't leave on my account. Stay, have coffee. Jacques's got plenty to go around."

"No, really, I'm late for...something." Madge's gaze kept darting from me to my ex-wife who seemed oblivious to the chaos she'd brought.

Sylvia shrugged. "Next time, then?"

Ignoring my squatter, I picked up my keys. "Let me drive you home."

But Madge had already opened the front door, sliding straight past me. "Don't worry, I've got my phone, I'll uber."

And then she vanished.

I turned to my ex-wife on the couch. A couch, if I remembered correctly, that she had hated from the second I'd picked it out. Its deep blue denimness didn't seem to be bothering her now.

"I see you still have that painting we bought on our honeymoon. Such a romantic holiday. I don't think we bothered to get out of bed even once. Not even to make coffee. But then you didn't have that fancy pants machine back then." She took another sip, a slow smile on her lips.

I ignored her comments. "C'mon, Sylvia. Saturday morning?"

Her blue eyes sparkled back at me as she stretched her long legs out in front of her. "Not just any Saturday morning, Jacques. Have you

forgotten?"

I looked at her blankly.

She smacked her hand down on the couch. "How could you forget? It's as much your business baby as it is mine. I've brought the financials for you to look at. Look how much lovely money we're making. Happy birthday to us!"

"It could've waited till Monday."

Sylvia arched her back upwards, revealing the perfect curves of her breasts as she stretched. Once upon a time that move would have rendered me as ravenous as a rabid dog for her. Not any more. I was older and I sure as heck was wiser. "I'm busy, you're busy. Saturday is just another day to bring home the big ones. Besides, I thought you'd like to see how our baby is doing." She looked up at me from under her false eyelashes. I could almost see the glue holding them in place. How well I remembered the time it took to put those lashes on. And to straighten the hair, and to apply the body lotion, and to touch up her nails...and how little time she took to actually listen to anything I'd said. "C'mon Jackles, you know you want to."

I knew no such thing. "You could have called first."

"Evidently. You two? I had no idea. Is it serious?"

"We'll see." I poured myself some coffee. Was it too early for a shot of whisky with that?

Sylvia examined her manicure. "Shall I put her straight?"

"No. That could make things worse. But seriously, you should be heading out, not her."

"She didn't exactly give me any time to explain. I was just as surprised to see her as she was to see me." She waved the folder before opening it up and poring over the pages. "You have to have a look at our baby's income sheet. It's totally amazing."

"Please stop calling it that."

She carried on: "I knew we could make some money, but I really didn't expect to make this much training putzes how to speak. Money for

jam, baby. Maybe I should put my rates up for the next financial year? We could make a killing.”

I phased Sylvia out. I had to make things right with Madge. Somehow, but how? *Think, de Villiers, what did Madge want more than anything?*

Trust—wasn't that what she was looking for? Or a little faith?

And the former Mrs. de Villiers had sunk all of those good things I'd been trying to shore up.

MADGE

My boots were in their bag, strapped to my shoulder. I could do this. I was doing this. The rink opened at 10am, and there I stood in the queue.

Ten a.m. Only the briefest of short hours ago, I'd been wrapped up in another fantasy of potential love. Ha! Look where that had got me. Nowhere. *That* was reality — cold, hard, and unforgiving like that ice. Ice that snapped your bones clean in half if you weren't careful or lucky. Hurt like hell, but you healed. Not like love. Wanted to know my heart and head? My ass, he wanted to know the space between my legs.

I'd take the ice any day.

It was time. If I didn't get onto that ice, I never would. And those boots couldn't just sit in the back of my cupboard forever.

Jacques would probably love skating. Fast, furious, potentially risky, it was his kind of sport. Ha! What was I even thinking about? He had ex issues.

Not the man for me. A dull ache throbbed in my temple as I recalled the crumpled sheets, his arm round my waist, his words *beautiful beautiful beautiful* in my ear lulling me to sleep.

Forget it. Forget him.

Kids of all ages gathered behind me. Some so young they were barely out of nappies. A few hesitant looking adults. All these kids made me nervous—chattering, laughing, bantering with each other, the confidence of youth on their side, and the doors hadn't even opened yet.

Mistake. I should get back in the car and go home.

The ticket booth opened. The queue surged forward. A phantom pain throbbed in my leg. Didn't the body always remember its trauma? Leg, arm or heart, a break was a break and it *hurt*.

Just buy the ticket, go in, and if you should change your mind, no harm done. At least you tried. What's that they say about getting back on a horse?

As the queue moved, a buzz of swarming flies invaded my stomach. *C'mon, you can do this. You can so do this.*

My turn.

"One please," I said with a confidence I didn't feel.

A gush of cold air hit me. The smell of rubber, the sound of the Zamboni as it hummed back and forth across the ice. A rush of memories. The five am Sunday morning practice sessions, the feel of landing an axel, the roar of the crowd as I won yet another trophy. Then the pain, the broken dreams, the end.

I recalled the trophies my father had dumped back on me. Useless bits of metal that translated into pots of money down the drain. I carried his disappointment round with me like a tortoise's shell.

This time would be different. I would skate for fun and I'd bring home that partnership. My life had moved on and was bigger, better...*lonelier*. I dismissed that thought.

I found a spot, sat down, and dumped my skates next to me. *You can do this.* A group of young girls strutted past, pink and lavender colored tights on as they made their way out onto the ice. Kids. Fearless. One sailed out, glided to the center, and executed a camel spin, her leg behind her head, just like that. No problem — like a bit of bendy rubber.

That used to be me.

I stretched out my good leg. *Cr-ick*. Less bendy than before, for sure. And to think that great sex hadn't helped. I laced up my boots, making sure to keep my ankle well-supported. Or procrastinating, whichever explanation fit better.

Boots on, I shuffled over to the lockers, bungled my gear in, snapped the lock, then faced the ice.

Oh boy, so *many* of them. Small kids, wild teens, and a host of dinky figure skaters in the center. Where had the ice gone? I could barely see it for bodies, kiddie bodies that slipped and slid wherever, grabbing on to whatever and whomsoever. The music cranked up to fever pitch, and the lights started to flash blue, green, red. Danger!

I was way too old for this. Teens locked lips, tiny hands reached up over the barrier as they skedaddled their way round.

A teenage boy screamed past, lost his balance and careered into the barrier. *Thunk*. A loud *thunk*. That had to *hurt*. I started to re-think. Skating was dangerous. Of course, kids skated out there like that—they had no health insurance to worry about. Besides, they were so short, their butts were almost on the ground to start with. But I had so much further to fall.

Oy.

“I like your boots.” A tiny voice. I looked down at the knee-high kidlet skate admirer. “Do you know how to go backwards?”

What was the answer to that? Love life? Sure, I was an ace at going backwards in that department.

“Backwards is like going forwards, only in the other direction. We learnt that at Academy,” continued the kidlet, before flouncing off back to the ice. Wise words indeed.

I followed her. If a five-year-old could do this, I could.

People blocked the gate onto the ice, a mass of arms, legs and skates. I pushed forward, aiming for the barrier. If I held the barrier the whole way round, I’d be fine.

An adult shuffled past, hands desperate to connect with the same barrier. I shifted out the way, and too late, I’d found the ice and was sailing forward.

Not too bad. Easy does it. Bob and weave through the skaters. Remember to bend. Head up. Glide. I geared down on my knees and pushed. My speed

picked up. *Oh, yes.* Left, right, left, right. I stroked in a zigzag motion, arms out stick straight.

“Careful!” In time, I saw the collision to my left. I swung right, and kept to my rhythm.

So far, so good. Next challenge—corners. As if on automatic pilot, my feet lifted, crossing one over the other as if I’d done it a million times before. Hadn’t I?

Breathe, stay calm, one foot then the other, and you can do this.

A few more laps of skating forwards, and I was just about ready to tackle backwards. Did I dare? My body decided for me and fell back into the familiar rhythm of my multitudinous warm-ups so many years before. No problem. My body tilted slightly forward, weight on the front of my skates, and just like that, I sailed backwards.

Flipping from backwards to forwards also no biggie, then.

Cool air caressed my face. This. Was. Epic. My thing, to quote Jacques.

A group of teens started a conga line. Strictly forbidden, according to the safety regulations drawn up in huge letters next to the rink. I jiggled and wiggled alongside them as they wove over the ice. Even the *doof doof* music began to have an effect — who’d have thought it?

Why hadn’t I done this ages ago?

A young couple stood near the barrier, holding hands. The way he glanced at his partner, the tenderness in his eyes, the rapt attention as she chattered away. He’d even moved a few strands of hair out of her eyes, all while he still listened. A lump lodged in my throat—Jacques had looked at me like that.

Forget it. I just didn’t do relationships, not with any measure of success. Jacques was just another example of that. Proof. And the connection, how often did anyone find that? Chemistry, magic, whatever it was they called it.

There was good stuff there.

Forget it.

With each stroke, I pushed my knee forward. *Oops*. Maybe that had been a little too much. *Right, go right*.

My toe rack clipped a hole in the ice. One moment I was skating, the next I'd thudded onto the ice. *Wham*. A second or two of confusion. Chills swept through my backside. Dammit.

This was why I no longer did ice skating. It was too risky. I rubbed at my poor ankles. I'd taken a chance and it hadn't worked out. At least I'd tried. A small voice chirped: *not really a big fall, you're okay, you're up, nothing broken, probably nothing bruised*.

Ha! What did that voice know?

A set of boots clambered over to me. "Are you alright?" That voice. I knew that voice alright and all of its rich deep maleness that had spoken those words to me last night—*beautiful beautiful beautiful*.

Jacques.

Ignoring his outstretched hand, I pushed back onto my blades. "What are you doing here?"

"Skating. Or trying to."

"How did you know I'd be here?"

"I didn't. I guessed."

Why did he have to look at me like that? Like the way that teenage boy had...no, no, no. No more with the hoping, wishing, and the dreaming.

Jacques teetered forward, one foot in front of the other, legs too straight, arms out like a penguin. "We have a business together. Sylvia and me. I'm her silent partner."

"She's one of JVD's clients?"

A kid whooshed past, spraying ice up against them.

"Punk." But Jacques was smiling. "Sort of. She came to me with her plan, over a year ago, and it looked like a win-win, so I helped her out—"

"Brought her clients, yes I know." Hadn't she mentioned that? Something about asking my ex for clients? And to think I'd thought she'd been joking. Had she lied about the fantastic shag part? No, no she

hadn't. In fact, Sylvia had been on the money with that one.

I pushed along. "Why was she at your house?"

No response, not a single word. I turned to where he'd been skating next to me. Where was he? I spun round. His feet windmilled in place, treading the ice. Now there was a potential disaster right there. I skated over, taking his wrist. "Here, let me help you. You know how you spell skate? B-e-n-d. Bend."

Jacques bent, ass out backwards. "Like that?"

I guffawed. "Kind of. Keep your back straight, and stop looking at the floor."

"I need to see where I'm headed."

"Look out there rather." I pointed to a huge Fanta billboard where about a thousand or so teens hustled for take-out. Keeping my hand on his wrist, I carried on with the instruction. "Push and glide, push and glide. Yeah, yeah, that's it." We ambled forward. "Ah yes, Mr. de Villiers, we'll make a skater of you yet."

"If you're thinking she's at my house often, she's not."

I drifted along, face forward, bobbing and weaving through potential disaster zones, like that kid who seemed to be grabbing onto everyone around him's pants.

Jacques continued. "Today's the anniversary of her business. Guess she wanted to celebrate."

Now or never. I inhaled deep. "And you're not still seeing her?"

Silence. "I divorced her. The only time I hear from her is when she wants something."

We made a few more laps. While I was lost in thought, Jacques kept just about upright. Sylvia hadn't said that she'd actually hooked up with Jacques. Sure, she'd implied it. But she hadn't actually *said* his name. And if they had? It wasn't as if Jacques and I were 'going steady' or something. Did people still even use that expression?

My stomach started to growl.

"You want to get something to eat?" Jacques's invitation hung in the

air. Starving, that's what I was. Nothing like all the brisk icy air and an overworking over-analytical brain to get the stomach demanding its due. "I've got to get to the office, sorry. Lots of work to catch up on before the holidays. Money doesn't just make itself."

A lie. A comfortable lie I'd used so many times to avoid getting involved with anything that might matter.

Jacques nodded, following behind me. I got off the ice and made for my locker. He sure looked more comfortable walking on the black rubber matted walkways than on the ice. I wanted my boots off and out of there. Why had he come here? He unclipped his hired boots, his feet sodden in his socks.

"What are you doing here?"

He looked up at me, those dark eyes soft, confused. A beat. "I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"You could have sent a message."

He waited as I pulled off my boots, cleaned and dried the blades before putting them back in their covers. "Did it feel good to be back on the ice?"

I nodded. That lump in the throat feeling looked set to be a permanent feature. Why did everything he say feel too much? Why was he asking the right thing, following me, finding me, taking an interest in me? Didn't he know that this is where things went wrong? He'd already got me into bed. He could leave already. Why didn't he just go?

I shoved my boots into my skating bag, tucked my gloves away, and wished I was somewhere else entirely. His hand found my shoulder. My heart started that stop-start beating that led to brain scrambling and body curdling. No. No. No. And yet, yes yes yes. His fingers worked their way across my shoulder to my neck, massaging, caressing. It would be so easy, too easy to fall into him.

But wasn't that what I wanted?

Too much.

I leant towards him and kissed his cheek. "I need some time." And for

the second time that day, fled in the direction of the nearest exit.

MADGE

Work. Now that was something that I could handle. And today, I'd find out about my partnership—that would be worth celebrating this Christmas. Images of Jacques flipped through my mind like a rolodex. Feckless? No. Daddy's boy? No, again. What did he have to be to sweep me off my feet? Superman? Even he would probably get the no go for his Kryptonian background or his penchant for underwear as outerwear.

What are you so scared of, Everson? Everything. Nothing.

Turning into my mother? Bullseye.

Mr. Boss Man held a folder in his hands as he walked past my desk.

“Ready?”

“Ready.” My nerves started to do their bungee jump thing in my gut. This was it. Partnership time. Oh. Boy.

No, I didn't have my own prime business like Sylvia, but dammit, I was going to be a partner in a premier international investor relations company. I deflated, a half-filled balloon of self-doubt. And what happened after I was partner? More work? More money? How much was enough? How much would make up for the lost sponsorships, the money my dad had invested in me, the years of wasted studying?

And what about love? What about that? Wasn't that worth letting into my life?

I settled into the boardroom, positioning myself just to the side of the head of the table. *Let Mr. Boss Man sit there.* Or would he sit opposite?

He arrived and made for the head of the table—of course. “Madge, thank you for being so patient. It’s been a mad second half of the year, as you’re well aware.”

I nodded. He continued. “Did you bring a copy of your last review? Good. Let’s see if your figures match mine.”

They did. He peered over his record of my mid-year review. “You’ve brought in a fair deal of business this year overall. Good on you. Well done.”

I beamed.

“And we also got some excellent feedback from clients. So, all good there.” He frowned slightly. “You didn’t quite make your targets though...”

“As you said, it’s been a tough year. I had to pitch in to help some of the other teams here and there. I had fourteen accounts to administer and —”

“I’m quite aware of that. We also got that extra performance bonus from JVD which sadly we’ve had to include in next year’s target. I know we talked about partnerships...”

Here it comes. Here it comes. Six long years, and here we go.

“...and it’s not that we don’t appreciate what you do for Capitol Hill, but we feel that a bit more experience could be helpful. Perhaps train up one or two more of your staff? We have organized a decent bonus for you, which I’m sure you’ll agree is more than substantial...”

I blanked him out. Did this mean no partnership? No partners? Nada? Nil? Zilch? *No partners?* Why? What had I done wrong? Wasn’t I good enough?

I interrupted him. “I don’t understand.”

Mr. Boss Man sighed. “Obviously, we value your work here.”

The words blurted out before I could stop them: “You can’t. You can’t possibly.”

He held up a hand. “Give me a second to explain. We only have room for one partnership this year.”

News to me. My mind raced. One partnership. Since when? Had there always been a cap on the number of promotions? I didn't think so. "I've been putting in the time and getting the results ever since I got here. Six years of exceeding targets."

My boss scratched at his throat. "And in that time, you've moved up the ranks, just as we discussed when you first arrived. And by and large, there have been a number of successes."

My words were dull. "Except not enough for a partnership."

"Not this year, but next, definitely..."

"Right, right," I said, thinking, *wrong, wrong*. Why was this happening?

"After much consideration, we decided to give it to Monty."

That silenced me. Monty. *Monty*? "But he arrived here after me. He didn't even have a team until late last year. He used to give me his work to check. He asked me to help write that annual report because he didn't know what was going on."

Mr. Boss Man examined the woodgrain of the boardroom table. "To be fair, he has made his targets, and he was essential to that IPO."

"Because the exec team were a bunch of sexist wankers."

"Madge! No need to use strong language. That's just a matter of opinion."

"He gets partner and I get a bonus? Is that right? Even though I made all the criteria needed, is that right? I've proved myself year after year after year."

"I'm sure we'll be able to review next year. June perhaps, maybe after first quarter." Mr. Boss Man shifted in his chair.

That's when I knew for certain. I'd seen him like this with clients. Any time they'd asked if he would supervise their account, or if they were going to get the front page of the Sunday Times or somehow, by the love of a benevolent universe, he would be able to increase their share price. He'd shift in his chair, swallow and lie. Lie like he was lying now.

Options. What were my options?

“I’m sure you’ll agree that the bonus is quite substantial, and there’s a raise as well, not quite in line with inflation, sadly. We all have to pull in the reins somewhat with the current economic crisis,” he continued, his voice almost a whisper.

My voice was flat. “Thank you.”

Mr. Boss Man waited a second then shuffled his papers and started reading aloud. “Goals for next year. Let’s see, what have you put in as your target? We can include the JVD account in next year’s money if you like, seeing as it’s the end of the year.”

I looked at my own handwriting. I’d been pretty damn sure that those goals would be achieved from the position of partner, not account director.

“The first one is about your staff, and some training. Shall we include Nomfundo in that? She needs to be brought on for some of the tech clients.”

He busied himself, scribbling notes on my goals. It was as if I was watching him from outside myself. This couldn’t really be happening? But it was. It was. I’d been brushed off. Monty had the partnership. I had to hand out extra training. He got the position, the title and an office of his own, and I got to make new targets again, and help whoever else came on board, no doubt whilst handling another fourteen clients, no bloody social life, and a developing ulcer.

With a thud, I landed back into reality. I could sit here and sign at the bottom of my review, agreeing to the goals that Mr. Boss Man wrote up for me, and wait for another whole long year for a partnership I was probably never going to get...or I could exercise my options.

“I’m done,” I said, in a small voice, so unlike my own.

Mr. Boss Man craned forward. “Excuse me?”

“I said: I’m done.” This time it sounded more forceful, certain.

“With the goals?”

“No. With Capitol Hill.”

He looked stunned. What? Minion not expected to talk back? “Are

you sure? You're one of our top people."

"Top people?" I couldn't believe my ears. "And yet, no partnership."

"I told you, next year is a definite option—"

"No, no next year. I resign. I'm done."

Mr. Boss Man uhmned and aahed. He kept looking at the goals in front of him for some sort of inspiration. Probably thinking of all of those fourteen clients and their upcoming schedules for the following few weeks. What's the problem, Mr. Boss Man? Fourteen clients should be no problem – maybe he could give them to Monty to handle?

I got to my feet. "I'll send you something in writing."

"Maybe we can talk about it?"

I just looked at him. "It's a bit too late for that."

With that, I headed back to my desk. According to the clock on my computer, the entire meeting had taken less than ten minutes. Hardly any time at all.

That disconnected feeling returned. I knew what the procedure was — pack up my stuff and leave, wasn't it? I'd seen it happen over and over with colleagues who'd decided that Capitol Hill's work ethic was not what they'd expected, who'd done with the office politics, who hadn't been given the opportunities their hard work deserved. Somehow, I never expected I'd be one of them.

Mr. Boss Man called me back into the boardroom. "Quick word."

I waited for him to speak. "If you're sure..."

"Absolutely."

"Then I'd like you to—"

"Clear my desk. I know."

Merry Christmas to me.

MADGE

Ping.

CharlieT: *Did you ask him about Christmas?*

Really? I pretended I hadn't seen the message. Clearing out my desk had taken much less time than I'd thought. Six years and all I had to show for it were some VIP passes, a couple of promotional gadgets and a big-ass book of contacts. It didn't even fit a Typek box.

I deleted all my emails and logged off for the final time.

Ping. I looked at phone. Jacques and his fourth WhatsApp of the morning.

JCQ: *just checking in ☺*

I'd text him back, I would, later.

Picking up my almost empty box, I surveyed the office which was pretty much vacant. Nomfundo'd already split for her vacation. Who else did I want to say goodbye to? Peering round, I noticed that Monty had long since left for his away time. Of course. He needed to celebrate his new promotion in the Caribbean or somewhere similarly out of a cell phone's signal reach. Well, his clients were just going to have to suck it up—I would not be the back-up plan any longer.

Without looking back, I swept out of the offices, hearing the glass doors swoosh behind me.

Outside, the day burned with the brilliance of summer. The smell of yesterday-today-tomorrow caressed me. The sprinklers cha-chuffed

across the lawns. Creepers, bushes and beds overflowed with color. Who got to appreciate this beautiful garden? Definitely no-one at Capitol Hill. They were all too busy looking at their screens in their hands and on their desks. Even the smokers didn't spend too much time on their surroundings.

For too long, that had been me. Head down, not looking. How could I have been so naïve as to think they'd give me the partnership? There'd been signs, hadn't there? Indications? Even a subtle hint? Those closed exec meetings? They never had any intention of offering me anything other than more work. Well, that would be the last time anyone underestimated me.

A *hadedda* bird wrestled a beetle from the ground with its beak.

What the hell was I going to do now? No job. No opportunities. No nothing. Panic double-dipped through me. And right before Christmas as well. How did that annoying little ditty go—the most wonderful time of the year. Bugger to that.

I glanced at my watch. Eleven o'clock. What did people do at this time in the morning?

LUNCH.

I soaked up the December sunshine, watching the world go past from a pavement café. The sun felt good. *Look at all these people!* All happy and relaxed, on holiday, doing their Christmas shopping and all that. Christmas cheer hung in red, green and gold from shop windows opposite, dormant lights strung from side to side. A loudspeaker sang about simply having a wonderful Christmas time. What? Was this song haunting me now? I shouldn't have had that hot chocolate. Now it just whirled round and round in my stomach, sloshing fear up towards the back of my mouth.

I wasn't on holiday. Ohno, I'd chucked in my job. Who did that? And

why? Because they didn't give me a partnership? One I'd earned, sure, but I'd had well-paying job, and prospects, and a fat bonus check.

And now?

Panic had firmly cemented in. I had no job and no prospects. How was I going to face the New Year? How was I going to face mom and dad? That hot chocolate gurgled in my stomach.

I'd put in a call to an agent, who, of course, was on leave. Shit.

Capitol Hill had agreed to pay out my three months' notice period, so I wasn't exactly destitute. But I needed to act, and fast. Great jobs didn't just land in your lap—you had to make your own opportunities. I checked my mailbox for the hundred and fiftieth time that hour. Habit. No new emails. Of course not. I'd already been blocked from the Capitol Hill server.

How quickly organizations forgot all about you. If I drove by there later in the day, the boom would come squarely down, denying me the access that had been no problem only three hours ago. What a difference a day makes. And how.

My phone started to ring—thank heavens. Who heard of an agent actually relaxing on holiday?

Mom. Should I let it go to voicemail? So tempting. I answered.

My mother's voice barked. "Did you remember to get the potatoes? Your father seems to think that Christmas dinner would be just fine without any kind of potatoes. Salads, he says. For Christmas! And he's the first person to complain about the dinner. Did you speak with your boss?"

"Not exactly." I knew my voice sounded off. Why was it so difficult to lie to one's own mother?

And as expected, Mom's tone changed. "What happened?"

"It's a happy Christmas for Monty. I'll remember to pop the champers for him." And that bastard Mr. Boss Man and all of his chauvinist cronies.

"You didn't get it?"

“Nope.” I motioned to the waiter for my bill. Speaking out loud, the reality of my newfound freedom seemed daunting. As if someone had sucked away any Christmas cheer. Bone dry.

“They can’t do that. You won the silver leaf award.”

My mother’s outrage made me bristle. “Last year, I won it. *Last year*. I didn’t make target. End of. Finish and *klaar*.”

“Well I suppose there’s next year.”

“Ja, about that—”

“Not to worry, you’ve got Christmas ahead. Charlie tells me you’re seeing this nice young man.”

How conversations went from bad to worse.

“Not really.”

“Oh? From what Charlie mentioned, he sounded ideal.” *I’d bet*. All those zeroes in his bank balance could cheer up Siberian wastelands. Or impossible to please mothers.

“He rides a motorcycle, mom”

A long pause. “I’m sure he’s lovely.”

A beep interrupted the call. “Ma, I’ve got another call. Can I call you back?”

The agent. Must be.

Jacques. “Hey there, how are you?”

“Great. How are things with you?”

The last in the bestselling conversation starter topics.

Why was he calling me? Hadn’t I walked away? Did he just want more sex? Christmas could be lonely, let’s face it. More suicides at Christmas than any other time.

But he’d seemed so sincere, right? That connection. It had started to feel, well, it had started to feel a lot like...love? The start of love?

Get real, Everson. Get with the program—no job, no prospects, no man, just a family Christmas to look forward to.

“Are you still there, Madge?” Damn, why did my heart have to do the cuddly bunny thing whenever I heard him say my name? Because it

didn't know what was good for me, never had, never would. I waded right in.

"No, you're through to the Playboy mansion."

He laughed. I defrosted a shard. "It's a long shot, but are you free tonight?"

I paused. Part of me wanted to say yes, but the other... "It's just not a good day."

"Want to talk about it?" So much of the so muchness. A beeping sound.

"Shit, my mother's on the other line. Hang on a sec." I punched a button. "Mom?"

Her voice was shrill. "Had you forgotten me? Nice. Your own mother. Are you bringing him for Christmas lunch?"

"Just hang on, ma, let me call you back. Damn it. Hello? Are you still there? He can't come for Christmas lunch, I just met him, and that's going to sound needy. Men. Love. That."

He sounded jovial. "Hey, if you're offering, I'll take it."

I froze, the heat burning through me. "Ah shit, I thought you were my mom."

"You're not offering Christmas lunch then?"

An Everson family Christmas? That would slaughter anything left in the relationship.

My words were like gun fire. "Sure, why not?"

"I'd love to. Send me the address."

A pause. "How'd the partnership go?" His voice seemed to loosen the tears all welled up and resting behind my eyes.

Another silence. "It didn't happen."

"You want to come over?"

I didn't know what I wanted. Six years of hard work for no partnership. Ten years of skating—hell more—and no Olympic medal. Would Jacques just add onto the list of complete and utter non-starters? "I'll see you on Christmas Day."

“I’m here. If you need me.”

I hung up. Madge Everson didn’t need anyone. I’d get through this. Even if it took a family-size bottle of vodka, I’d get through this. WWSBD? What would Sylvia Booyens do? For starters, I bet she wouldn’t run to Jacques with her problems, ohno. She’d go out there and slay the dragon herself and serve up the head for dinner in her sexy white bikini with her fantastic shagging abilities.

Big girl panties time. No job, no boyfriend, and no hope on the horizon.

I could so do this.

JACQUES

I looked at my watch again. She was late. Then again, Sylvia would be late for her own funeral. Keeping people waiting seemed to be one of her favorite pastimes. Up there with shopping for Jo'burg.

Sylvia had suggested meeting at The Saxon Hotel. She would. Expensive, secluded, *expensive*.

I'd decided on the Garden Shop on Main for two reasons— it was midway between the office and my last meeting, and it was filled with kids and their beleaguered parents. Almost no chance of the long lingering lunches that Sylvia specialized in—she could make a cappuccino last for hours.

Taking a detour past the pet enclosure to have a look at the pythons that wrapped up against the warmed glass, there probably wasn't a more appropriate meeting place.

And now I sat there, already halfway through my sparkling water.

"Dar-ling, dar-ling," sing-songed Sylvia as she scooted towards me, arms outstretched.

I ignored the arms, gave her a brief peck on the cheek, and motioned her towards the chair opposite. She chose a chair alongside. I sighed.

"I knew you'd call me," she said. "You can't keep away. You never could."

Her hand flitted to my thigh and squeezed. So going to ignore *that* gesture.

She glanced round. "Cute place. Not quite my style. Did you know that they have this tasting menu at The Saxon that—"

"Maybe you'd like to order?"

Sylvie peered down at the menu, dismissing it with a wave. "Do you think they do specialty teas? These places don't always know the difference between that awful Five Roses stuff and real tea. You should try this little place, the Tea Contessa. Angie told me about it, you remember Angie, right? She remembers you."

She clicked her fingers behind her head. A waiter appeared. Not that Sylvia had noticed. "Hard to get good service these days. But what do you expect with—"

I pointed to her left. "He's there. How are you?"

"Right. Do you have loose leaf tea?" The waiter looked blank. "Forget it. I'll have a strong cappuccino please. But, if it's not strong, I'm going to send it back." She dismissed the menu. "What are you up to with the fund raising? I've been reading about you in the Financial Mail. Such a nice piece too—Capitol Hill's the definite go to for a little media exposure. You looked amazing by the way in that suit. Blue always was your color."

"We're not here to talk about my business."

Her voice dropped. "We're here to talk about our baby."

"It's not a baby, Sylvie. It's a business. Just like any other—"

"But it's *our* business. You and me together. And, it's starting to really reap the rewards. Did you look at the financials I left with you? I really think we're onto something here. Maybe if you joined me sort of more full-time—"

"Not possible."

"Okay, okay, just asking." Her voice thickened. "And Madge, you an item now? You couldn't get me out of there fast enough the other day. It was rude, Jackles." Her eyelashes fluttered. "And what about us and that night?"

"You were drunk and crashed on my couch."

“But in the morning—”

I finished her sentence for her. “You kissed me.”

She scoffed. “Oh, come on. That’s not true. We’ve always had a ‘thing’ between us. And it hasn’t left us. Look, you’re here now. Having lunch with me, years later.”

“You left, Sylvie.”

She flicked her hair. “And you came running after me. Come on, that was always part of the fun. The whole chase thing.”

The waiter returned with her cappuccino.

She took one sip. I braced.

“No, no, no, no, *no*. I said that it needed to be strong or I’d send it back. Now this isn’t strong. Tell the barista or whoever to put in an extra dose of espresso. This is not strong. It’s not what I asked for. Take it back.”

Heads started to turn in our direction. I smiled at the woman closest to us. Here we went!

“I said take it back!” Sylvie waited for the waiter to remove the offending cup. “Is it so difficult to make one cappuccino? Really? And I told him, you heard me, he heard me. Did he listen? No.”

Adjusting her sunglasses onto the top of her head, she perched forward, her mouth a perfect deep pink pout of outrage. Once upon a time, I’d thought she’d been assertive—a woman who knew what she wanted and wasn’t afraid to go after it. I should have remembered that observation before I married her. Business partner? Sure. Wife? Not so much.

“Look Sylvia, it’s great that the business is doing well—”

“What say we have a little celebration?” Her hand found its way back to my thigh, her blue eyes hard as nails under her flattering eyelids. I had to hand it to her, she was pulling out the full-on flirt arsenal. The pout deepened. “Christmas lunch, somewhere exclusive, somewhere private, with our own five-star room for two?”

I removed her hand. “How about a buy out?”

The waiter returned, placing a new cappuccino in front of Sylvie. Her hand hooked straight into the waiter's arm. "Wait. Let me just take a sip now. Wait." She sipped. "Now why couldn't you have done that the first time? Was that so difficult?"

She dismissed the waiter with a wave of her hand and started to scrape the foam off the cappuccino. A quick glance at me and a quick 'thank you' was mumbled.

I took a deep breath. "I'll pay you out for my half of the business. What do you say?"

"I agree."

Yay. The infamous Christmas miracle.

"I'm relieved to hear that," I said. "I think it's high time that we..."

"...admit that we can't live without each other," she said, inching her way forward. "You're all work, work, work. And look at you, you always meet with me." She leaned in close, her hand back on my thigh, her face inches from mine. "Face it Jacques, we're meant to be together. You know we can't keep away from each other. This is what we are. Destiny. And think of all that money we made, how much more we can make if we stick together."

So swiftly did she lunge forward, that I didn't think to move, not until her lips had found mine. And how had her hand managed to reach behind my head that quickly? I pulled away, but she had me in her grip.

A smug smile spread across her face. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. How could I have ever found that demanding face of hers attractive?

I pushed her away. "It's enough. We're over. And I want out of the business."

She smiled then. "You'd never give up something so lucrative."

"Try me."

A flash of annoyance cut through her features and then it was replaced by her picture perfect smile. "Fine, you can buy me out of your share. For twice the amount you think you're getting away with. Not a cent less." She smiled then. "And I want the Ferrari."

“Ah, now there’s the Sylvia I once knew and loved.” She didn’t want me, just the cash and the toys and the next challenge. That’s why she’d done so well in live television—always something new, something different. “Deal. I’ll have the paperwork drawn up this afternoon.”

She tilted her head to the side. “I like her, Madge. We go out sometimes. Did she tell you?”

“She mentioned it.” I finished my nearly cold coffee. “Don’t give her the wrong idea now.”

“Oh, so you *do* like her?”

I dropped some cash on the table, leant forward and kissed my ex-wife’s cheek. “Keep well, Sylvia. I’ll have my lawyer contact you.”

“Love you always, Jackles.”

“Merry Christmas.”

MADGE

Charlie and I stood in my parents' kitchen as we organized Christmas lunch.

Merry Christmas to me. It was perfectly normal to polish off all of the Christmas champagne before midday, wasn't it? In the Everson household, it was hardly unexpected.

Charlie picked up the empty bottle and grimaced. "Thanks for leaving me some."

I smiled back. "You're welcome."

"You don't want to be drunk when Jacques gets here."

I headed for the fridge, then started on a box of Quality Street. "It's Christmas. Time to be jolly."

"Punishment, more like. Christmas with our parents? Why didn't you just break it off with him?" Charlie opened up a bottle of white wine. "Angel, you want some?"

I handed over my glass.

"Actually, I was speaking to Brian," said Charlie, as my brother-in-law entered the kitchen.

Charlie looked like sunshine had found a permanent home at the sight of her husband. Would I ever feel that way about someone? I'd let that tiny glimmer of hope in that maybe, just maybe, I could feel that way about Jacques.

"How's that partnership coming along?" Brian took a glass of white

from me.

“Oh, about that...” I stalled. Christmas wasn’t really the morning for breaking with the bad news. On the other hand, my entire family might well be drunk long before lunchtime, which meant that perhaps they wouldn’t remember. As if. My father could and had erected a shrine to all of my failures.

Charlie chimed in. “Didn’t you have that meeting with your boss? What did he say?”

I thought over my response. “Well—”

Dad wandered through the door. Timing. “Yes, how did that go? I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

Not all of the wine in South Africa was going to help ease this particular conversation. My mother followed my father into the kitchen. “What are you talking about?” She reached for an ashtray.

My father picked up the empty champagne bottle. “Good news then?”

“If you’re talking about the promotion, Madge didn’t make it, did you dear?” For added measure, mother dearest ground her stub into the smoldering ash. How poetic.

Charlie’s aaaaaah could be heard by outer Siberia.

“Hmmm.” Dad rocked back and forth. His expression was impossible to read. I wanted the ground to swallow me into its dark, murky depths where I could hide out in my shame without fear of visibility. “You’ll have to pull your finger out next year then.”

I nodded. “Maybe next year will be better.”

He frowned. “Did they give you a reason why?”

“Seems I’m missing the right appendage.”

Dad raised his eyebrows.

I explained: “If I was say Monty, with fewer qualifications, less experience and ability to do the job, I would have the partnership, no problem, because he has that extra special bit that gets him into the fairy circle, which, barring extensive surgery, I’m just never going to have. Not

at Capitol Hill, at least.”

Dad frowned. “I’m not following.”

“I’m not a man. What I say doesn’t count, my billing’s not as good, and clearly anything I have to say or do is far too emotional. Cheers to me.”

“Damn typical,” said Charlie. “Used to be like that at my old work until that bitch boss from hell Pauline showed up. Mind you, then it got worse.”

Dad then added salt to the wound. “Maybe this Monty is just better than you, it can’t be that bad.”

I let out a sigh. “Yes, you’re right. Of course it’s not that bad.”

“Did you at least get a decent raise? Bonus?” asked Charlie. “And yes, Dad, it is that bad. You just don’t notice cos you’re a man.”

Dad shook his head, grabbed the whiskey, and retreated from the kitchen.

“Did anybody think to check the turkey?” Mom stood there, making no motion towards the oven. “It’s been in there since five this morning. I got up at five this morning to put that turkey in. Your father’s done fuck all to help, just left me with the turkey.”

“I told you I’m handling it,” said Charlie. “It’s got about twenty minutes or so, I’d guess. And I’ve put the Yorkshire pudding in, so don’t open the oven door.” Mom slammed the oven door closed again. “What did you do that for?”

“I was just looking.”

Charlie howled. “Now they’ll be ruined. You know they don’t rise. Wait. Let me just check, they might still be okay.” Charlie went over to check on her dinner.

I continued to sip my wine, knowing full well it wouldn’t be long before I was included in this rather welcome diversion.

“Madge, drain these Brussel sprouts would you?” Mom pointed to the stove. *There it was!*

I put my glass back down and did as instructed.

Questions about bonuses and raises were forgotten in the harried rush of over-exertion that was the traditional Christmas lunch in Johannesburg. Why not a braai and salad? No, that's just not Christmas.

A bead of sweat slid down Charlie's face as she wrestled with the turkey.

I drained veggies and plonked them in side dishes.

The doorbell rang.

"That'll be your guy," said Mom. "Someone better set the table."

"He's not my guy," I squealed. "And how come you haven't done the table yet? One job, just one job."

I hurtled towards the door.

He'd parked the Landie up behind Charlie's Tazz. I waited as he got out of the car. Bastard. How dare he look that gorgeous? Loaded down with armfuls of presents and supermarket packets, he stumbled towards me.

"Merry Christmas." He aimed to kiss me. I offered my cheek then changed my mind. God, his lips on mine felt good.

We looked at each other and I felt my stomach give way. No, no, not part of the plan. Still, I softened a little. "Lovely to see you. Please come in. Lunch's nearly ready."

I led him through to the kitchen.

"Hello Jackie boy! I hope you brought more wine. Madge's nearly finished off the lot," said Charlie, giving Jacques a hug. Brian and he shook hands. "Good to meet you. Whisky?"

Jacques nodded.

"Which one of you is going to help me with this turkey?" Charlie pointed to the cooked bird that rested in the pan.

Jacques headed over. Brian grabbed the oven mitts. I swigged more wine.

"You must be Jacques." Mrs. Everson, resplendent in her 'Kiss the Cook' apron, emerged from the lounge. "Don't you think it would be better if you put the turkey on that board over there rather than scald the

worktops, Charlotte? You know your father will go ballistic if he sees that.”

The turkey landed onto the carving board.

Jacques handed over a bunch of flowers he’d brought. Mom gushed. “Thank you, Jacques, they’re lovely. Usually I don’t like flowers, they just die. But such a lovely gesture, isn’t it? Aren’t they beautiful and they smell wonderful. Madge, how about finding a vase for these?”

My mother beamed. Jacques winked at me. Total kiss ass.

“You need a hand with that turkey, Brian?” he asked, rolling up his shirt sleeves.

“Sure,” said Brian, brandishing a carving knife more akin to slasher movies.

Charlie whisked past me holding a tray of Yorkshire pudding. “If you’d stop gawping Madge, perhaps you’d like to get the table ready?” Her words were clipped.

I gritted my teeth. “Yes, doing it now.”

Leaving Jacques and Brian to wrestle the dead bird, I headed into the dining room.

“Oh. Holy. Shit.” Piles of laundry slumped over most of the table. One look at the tablecloth, and I knew it hadn’t seen the insides of a washing machine anytime this century. The wooden floor was covered in dog fur that drifted past like tumbleweed. One of my mother’s cats snuggled on a chair, leaving most of her fur behind.

Not even with a team of cleaners would I get this place decent in time. A perilous thought—the bathroom. Was that tidy? Had bleach made even the vaguest inkling of an appearance?

A sound of buzzing and sawing came from the kitchen.

I gathered up as much of the laundry as I could, encountering another cat in amongst some towels. Dashing down the corridor, I dumped the lot in the spare bedroom.

Heading back, I stuck my head in the kitchen. Clearly, they’d given up with the carving knife. An electric knife made quick work of the

turkey. Charlie jiggered at the stove, no doubt making some sort of sauce.

I fled back to the dining room.

This had been a bad idea. Sure, I'd wanted him to see the catastrophe that was my family. But no, not like this. Everything was so messy, so dirty, so full of clutter. Whipping off the tablecloth, I was assailed with dust.

My mother wandered in. "He seems nice. Looks familiar though. I've definitely met him before. What did he get you?"

"Nothing. We're not doing gifts." Weren't we? I had no idea.

"Your father gave me a giftcard. He said I could organize my own gift." She lit a cigarette and adjusted the straps of her apron.

"Mom, where's a clean tablecloth?"

"It was there. With the washing. Where've you put it?"

But I'd headed back down the corridor. For fuck's sakes. It was Christmas Day. *Christmas Day*. Couldn't Mom have thought about this last night?

Stomping back with the requisite tablecloth, I could hear Brian and Jacques yak-yakking about some business something or other. Good. Last thing I needed was for Jacques to have some long-dormant asthma problem arise.

I settled the clean cloth onto the table.

"Aren't you going to give the table a clean first?"

I shot my mother a look. "No time. Dinner's out the oven."

With nimble fingers, I started to dress the table with some antiquated Christmas decorations which somehow were still sparkly. "Where are the candles?"

Her mother frowned. "I'll go have a look."

"Yes, go do that," I muttered, wondering why this Christmas had to be exactly the same as previous Christmases. Couldn't my parents have tried—just this once—to be normal parents, reading in the lounge, freshly laundered, instead of waiting for me and Charlie to get things on

track?

One by one, I set each place. A ginger kitty leapt up on the table. "Tom, get the hell off!" Bits of sparkly shiny glitter tumbled onto the floor as he scattered.

At exactly that moment, the dog wandered in, spotted Tom and gave chase.

"Mom! Why's the dog in the house?"

Mom sauntered back in, another cigarette in hand. "She's always in the house."

"Remember what happened last Christmas? She and Tom stole the bloody turkey. Can't she just sit outside for a moment? She's dragging water all across the floor. And where are the candles?"

"Oh yes, I knew I was out there for something." She disappeared, wafting cigarette smoke.

I looked at the table. Better, but not great. I headed over to where a painting sat skew on the wall. Didn't anybody take any pride in this house?

Jacques appeared. "Do you need help?"

His pale pink shirt looked as if it had been splattered with turkey grease.

"I think, you might..." I pointed at the offending stains.

He shrugged. "Just a shirt."

"It won't come out. It'll be ruined."

"You just want me to take my shirt off."

My eyes met his with a rush of desire.

"Here they are. I think this one has run down a bit, but these ones are all good. They were on special at Mr. Price. Three for two or something." Mom shoved a candle under Jacques's nose. "Here. Smell this one. Cranberry."

Jacques obliged. I snatched the candles away.

"No need to do that," my mother said, then in an aside: "she gets all uptight whenever she has friends over."

I wanted the floor to swallow me up, to just disappear into that dust cloud. "I do not." I set the candles down and lit them.

"She does, you know. We used to call her Little Miss Uppity. You know like the books? Remember them?"

Brian stuck his head round the door. "Can we bring through the food?"

A muffled yell from the kitchen.

"What? I can't hear you," I yelled back. Jacques looked back at me, his eyebrows raised. "What? You don't shout at your siblings?"

I marched past Jacques and into the kitchen. "What did you say, Charlie?"

Charlie roared. "Come help me carry. How am I supposed to do this by myself? I'm not goddamn Superwoman you know."

I picked up a bowl of cauliflower cheese. "Yes, I know. I was busy with the table."

"Oh, the table. So important."

I let the sarcasm fly. Why did Charlie volunteer to do the whole turkey thing if it made her as bitchy as a harpie on PMS?

"Take the gravy in as well." Charlie shoved a jug into my hand. Splish splosh went the brown sauce up and down my top. Gritting my teeth, I headed back into the dining room where Jacques was helping Brian organize plates of food in the center of the table.

I hovered with the gravy. "No damn way that's going to fit."

"Language! What have you done to your top? Don't you think you'd better get that rinsed off? It'll ruin," drawled Mom, already sitting at the table, a paper hat sitting at an angle on her pouffed-up blonde hair. "You know, Jacques, I can't think where I've seen you before. Your face looks so familiar."

I slammed down the gravy, causing more of it to slip-slop over the lip. I smiled sweetly at Mom.

Charlie pushed through the doorway. "Move, this is the last of it. These are supposed to be Yorkshire puddings, but thanks to someone

opening the oven door, they're more like missiles. Right. So eat then." She plonked down the flat puddings and went back into the kitchen.

"Where's your father?" Mom wrinkled her nose at the sight of the puddings. "When I used to make them, they use to puff out. They were enormous. Your sister needs to take more care. John! John!" Her voice bellowed.

I looked up at Jacques. His eyes were wide with amazement. Oh yes, welcome to the Eversons in all their glory.

Dad hobbled in, hands rubbing together. "Right, everybody got drinks?"

Charlie re-appeared with two bottles of champagne. "Here."

He took them from her and filled empty glasses.

"You're supposed to use the other ones," said Mom, watching him pour. "The ones without the chips in them." She nudged Jacques then and started to laugh. "To impress the guests."

I finished up my champagne and immediately set it out for a refill. "You might want to help yourself before it's all gone," I suggested to Jacques, pointing towards the food.

"And if no-one likes it, then tough," said Charlie, Brian's hand rubbing up and down her arm in a soothing motion.

"Here's to a merry Christmas." I held up my glass. As the glasses around me clinked my own, I prayed that a new job would be my Christmas present. And Jacques. Maybe.

"Cheers," he said, touching his glass to mine, looking me straight in the eyes for a fraction too long. I felt the burn to the tips of my toes.

"I remember where I know you from. The Garden Shop. You were there with that woman who gave that waiter a terrible time," said Mrs. Everson. "That one from that program, the blonde. I think he was kissing her."

I turned to look at Jacques. So did Dad, Mom, Charlie, and Brian.

But then I looked at the flowers that he'd given Mom. I got up and walked into the kitchen, heading for the bin. No doubt about it—the

discarded plastic wrapping was pretty clear—the Garden Shop.
Jacques followed me in. “Let me explain.”

JACQUES

I considered my answer—I might not get another chance. “Sometimes the past has a problem staying in the past.”

“You don’t have to tell me—”

“I do. I’m not interested in her. I divorced her. But she doesn’t have an off switch. Yes, she kissed me. And I pushed her away. I met with her to discuss a buy out. She signed the papers yesterday.”

Madge’s head hung low. “I can’t compete with her.”

“You’re streets ahead of her. I don’t want her, I want you.” I repeated what I’d said before. “Here and here.” Heart and head. “And what’s in your soul.”

I locked eyes with her—she dropped her gaze first.

Madge gestured towards the dining room. “We better get back.” Madge returned to the table. I followed. “Charlie, this turkey is excellent. Thank you for going to so much effort.”

Charlie beamed. “It’s nothing.”

The remainder of the dinner passed without incidence— just a lot of polite scraping of knives and forks across the crockery.

Watching Madge’s family, I was surprised how similar they were to my own. Once upon a time, when my mother was still alive, and my brother lived on the same continent. It seemed like a very long time ago.

Maybe it was time for me to start putting together my own family? Own home? Kids? The whole caboodle. Wasn’t that why I was looking

for balance?

“Watch it, Jacques,” said Mrs. Everson. “The dog’s about to get your turkey.”

Mr. Everson, not bothering to hide the fact that he was feeding the cat from the table, changed the subject. “Did you ask for a six-month review on the partnership, Madge?”

Madge swallowed. “No.” And then in a small voice. “I quit.”

More silence. A skirmish broke out under the table as the Everson pets fought over a piece of turkey.

“Tom, what are you doing?” yelled Mrs. Everson.

“What do you mean quit?” demanded Mr. Everson.

All eyes turned to Madge. “I mean as in: walked out, told them to shove it, left, handed in my parking sticker, the whole shebang.”

I reached for her hand and this time she didn’t pull away.

Her father bristled. “But why? Do you know how difficult it is to find a job in this—”

“Yes, yes and yes. And I’m sure I’m going to regret it and all.” My hand squeezed hers. “But I’d given them six years, and all they’d given me was other execs to train who now have partnerships. I’m done.”

“Am I to assume you don’t have another job lined up?”

I squeezed Madge’s hand again. It was like facing a firing squad.

“No, Dad. Not as yet.”

“Best you get in contact with some of those agents. Have you called them?”

“Yes, I will. I’m not planning to not work.”

“You shouldn’t leave a job without something else to go to. In this kind of a market? And how do you expect to look after yourself? Money doesn’t fall from the sky. When I think of all the opportunities that you’ve had. Call them and ask for your job back.”

“I can’t do that.”

“You’d better. You can’t keep quitting when the going gets tough. That’s not how life works.”

Madge's voice cracked. "Like I don't know that."

I jumped in. "Madge is very talented at her work. I've seen her in action. I have no doubt she'll find something else easily."

Mr Everson wasn't listening. "I don't understand why you'd throw it all away like that. You had it right there." He slapped the palm of his hand. "But I suppose you did that before—with the skating."

Madge paled. "I broke my leg in five places."

I tried again. "But it's Christmas, and there's a new year coming." I raised my glass. "To new beginnings wherever they may lead."

Charlie and Brian raised their glasses. Mr. and Mrs. Everson exchanged glances. Tough crowd. No wonder Madge slip-slided from me all the time. Her face was ashen, most of her food untouched.

One by one, the Eversons dispersed from the table. Her father, wordlessly, got up from the table, his plate abandoned. Charlie whipped away my plate. "That's it for another year. You can put the washing back out here," she added, to her mom.

"I'm going for a cigarette." Mrs. Everson abandoned the washing up to her daughters.

"Every fucking year, every fucking year. How many times has she washed up now?" Charlie raged at her mother's departing back.

Madge counted on her hand. "What? Including this one? Never."

I rolled up my sleeves again. "How can I help?"

Madge put her hand on my arm. "You're my guest. You don't have to do anything."

Charlie wasn't having any. "Oh yeah? He and Brian can load the dishwasher."

"Sorry, Jacques. I shouldn't have made you come here for Christmas." Madge swilled the last of drink. "It's always a disaster."

"No disaster. What say you, Brian? Let's get this dishwasher loaded."

Ten or so minutes later, the kitchen was spotless, all machinery whirring away. Mr. Everson sat in his chair in front of the TV, and Mrs. Everson smoked in the back garden. Where was Madge?

Not in the house, that was for sure. I tried the front garden. Madge stood in between the various cars that littered the driveway holding something to her face. An audible *click click*.

"C'mon lighter, don't fail me now," she said, battling to light a cigarette. "Aha!"

One deep drag later, she exhaled. "Much better." She then coughed, her chest heaving. "Wait till we get to dessert. Charlie and mom should start with the major histrionics."

I smiled. "I love your sister."

"She's insane, like the rest of my family."

"Everybody thinks that about their family. But family is just that, family. At least you still have family here. I'd do anything to have my mother here, even if it was for an argument. Your father's coming from his view of the world, that's all. He doesn't want to see you fail."

She took another drag, holding the cigarette between two bird-like fingers. It didn't suit her.

"Sorry about the partnership. And your job. I know it was important to you."

"It's okay," she said, inhaling and then spluttering. "How could I have smoked these things for as long as I did?"

My eyebrows raised. "You smoked?"

"A good ten years or so."

"Rebel."

"That's me." She ground the remains of the stub underfoot. "My job was...important. That's all I concentrated on, for so long. And for what? For nothing."

"Not for nothing. You've had great clients, made connections, you're amazing at your job—"

"Yeah, thanks for that back there. Kind of you."

"Kind of me? Working with you was a reminder to jack up my thinking, to up my game."

"Don't lie."

“No lie. You think I just want to sweet talk you into bed or something?”

“The thought had crossed my mind.” Her words were teasing but her gaze glanced to me and back again. Was she as nervous as I was? I took her in my arms and held her close. She smelt of tobacco, of ash, and of warmth and cinnamon. “Nothing you learn is lost. It sounds clichéd, but it’s not. All of that skating? A sport that’s damn difficult that you mastered. And you’re back on your blades again. You watch, the same thing will happen with your career. You haven’t given up, you’ve just been thrown a curve ball. Go with it.”

“Easy for you to say. You’ve already made your millions.”

“Trust the process, that’s all I’m saying. If leaving that job felt like the right thing, then you did the right thing.” Slowly, her body untensed, her muscles slackening as she relaxed against me.

Her voice was so quiet, I almost didn’t hear her. “I’m scared.” I pulled her closer, my arms wrapping tighter round her, a wall of protection.

“Life is scary. But not so bad when you don’t do it alone.”

She relaxed. “Together then?”

“Absolutely. I’ve been burned before too, Madge. I’ve lost my mom young, and then my dad drifted in his grief. And you’ve met my money mad wife. You sure you can handle being with a lowly carpenter?”

“If you can handle an unemployed lady?”

I paused, drawing as much comfort from her as she was from me. “I’ve got something for you.”

“I bet.”

“Dirty mind. And on Christmas day, *nogal*.”

MADGE

Christmas day. Always an event at the Eversons. And God help me if Jacques hadn't just sailed through the whole thing as though it were normal. Wasn't that why I'd asked him? To point out my imperfections and show how genetically I just couldn't be expected to hold everything together, not all of the time? That if he were to choose me, he was doomed to a lifetime of non-perfect disappointment?

That I'd be just like my mother—disappointed, unfulfilled, miserable, more interested in my wine and animals than in anything else.

Jacques slid back beside me, holding a gift-wrapped box. "Merry Christmas."

Looking at him in his turkey-splattered pink shirt, I argued that he, himself, wasn't a bad present. Maybe my future too.

"What did you get me, Mr. de Villiers?"

"I didn't get you anything."

"And this is then?" I held up the box. Intrigued, I unpeeled the tape. Careful not to tear the paper, I unwrapped what looked like a folded-over chess board. "I don't get it."

"Here, let me show you," he said, taking it from me. "Look, two different woods, right? The black and the white. Only not quite so. Then," he opened the box, "here are the pieces."

One by one, I examined them. Carved—hand-carved—polished, detailed, and exquisite.

“They all have hearts.” Queen of Hearts, King of Hearts, rook of hearts, pawns, all of them.

“Exactly. Chess is a game...”

Where was he going with this? Hadn’t he heard of comic store gift cards? “Riiight...”

“...a game of strategy; to win. Ultimately, but sometimes, it’s in the joy of the game, in matching your opponent, doing the unexpected. The best chess games are savored, spent with a master whose ability matches your own.”

His face grew animated as he warmed to his theme. Somewhere above, a plane circled.

“Of course, you can choose to play or not. It’s just a game. But, if you do choose to play, it can change you, who you are, how you look at things, just by having a worthy opponent.”

I smiled. “I don’t think you’re talking about chess anymore.”

Jacques grinned. “As I said, with a worthy opponent—”

“But there are winners and losers. What if you’re always losing your...your hearts?” I pulled out one of the pawns. It looked like my heart—red, pulped, tired from hoping, tired from wishing, from wanting.

His hand covered mine. “Sometimes you’ll lose. Sometimes you’ll win. Sometimes you’ll draw. But if you don’t play, you’ll never know.”

“How do you know I’m not like her?”

He paused. “Because you greeted the workers at the flower farm. You stopped to wait for pedestrians when you drove, and you didn’t notice the young guys checking you out at the ice rink.”

“Wait, there were young guys?”

“There were. Drooling at you in your tight pants.”

“Leggings. They’re called leggings.” All of the feelings whirled in my stomach. “And you noticed all of that?”

“I noticed a lot more. Like your bitten fingernails and the way your eyes light up when someone mentions chocolate.”

I couldn’t meet his eyes. I dare not. My fingers worked over the detail

on the Queen of Hearts. It smelt like lacquer and wood. Earthy. “Hang on a second—did you make these?”

Jacques nodded, his foot scuffing at the driveway paving.

He’d *made* them. For me, *made them for me*. “You should so do this for a living.” I nudged him. “These are beautiful.”

“I love my work. It’s my thing.”

I closed the box gently and smoothed my hand over the surface. “You weren’t lying about the carpentry.”

“Nope, I didn’t lie about anything.”

I still couldn’t meet his eyes. The plane overhead whirred on its flight path, the neighbors’ kids next door squealed, and a blast of music came from inside the house. *Oh God no, please God no.*

Jacques cocked his head. “Is that...Barry Manilow?”

“At the Copa...Copacabana.”

“Pretty cool,” said Jacques. “What do you say, Madge Everson? Want to play?”

I looked at him, looked at those brown eyes that had hypnotized me, the beautiful curve of his lips, the solidness of his shoulders. “Okay.” A pause. “And maybe after that we can have a game of chess.”

EPILOGUE

MADGE

Summer rolled around again. Highveld storms scorched through the afternoons with lightning precision. Sweet peas and yesterday-today-and-tomorrows saturated the air with their heady scent.

I waited at Jacques' front door. My denim shorts frayed at the edges, my pink shirt already starting to dampen with perspiration under my jacket. "C'mon, we're going to miss it."

A voice called from within. "They're not going to fly away."

"But we still might be too late this time round."

Jacques emerged in the doorway, a backpack in his hand. "Come here, woman."

"We're already late."

His voice dropped to that sexy, husky drawl I loved. "But I need you now."

I giggled as he pulled me towards him and kissed me. A year together and I still swooned. "Let's go back in," I whispered.

He laughed. "But we're going to be late." He mimicked me good-naturedly before reaching round and grabbing my ass.

"Hands, Mr. de Villiers." But I laughed as I leapt away from him.

He swung the backpack behind him, fastening the straps tight. "I can't believe you've never been to see the eagles before. How did you miss it?"

"Northern suburbs girls don't head into the wild west's botanical

gardens to look at eagles. Besides, didn't someone offer to take me, then renege on the deal?"

All innocence. "Are you referring to me?"

"The one and only." He kissed me again, jumpstarting my pulse.

"We do have a few minutes, just a few..." I gasped.

He pulled away. "No, we have a date. Let's go."

Jacques watched as I put on my helmet, checking that it was on good and proper. It had taken a fair bit of convincing, but I'd come round. I climbed onto the motorbike, Jacques's arms around me.

"My turn," I said, with the exuberance of a young child, as I revved the bike before heading it out onto the open road.

AS THE SUN started to set, we hiked to the top of the waterfall. From there, all we could hear was the rush of the water, and the silence of the wild that stretched out behind us. Courting black eagles swooped over the last of the day's sky.

"How magnificent." I followed the run of the water, the wide open skies above me. So like the past year that had opened up to me in ways I hadn't dreamt possible. It had now been eight months since I'd headed out on my own. It had been tough. But it had felt good. I had two new clients...one of them Sylvia. Life was strange, sometimes. Unpredictable.

I glanced at Jacques. Sure, I'd snorted when Charlie had suggested the Camel man analogy, but taking in the stubble, the tan, the relaxedness of a man at one with his spirit for adventure, you bet he was my Camel man. Not only had I grown in appreciation of the infamous motorbike, but I'd also tried my hand at racing his Ferrari round an empty track, and at heading out to tackle sand dunes in his Land Rover.

He'd even gone ice skating with me, more than once, and damn, if his stops weren't better than mine, spraying ice everywhere.

The gravel under my feet crunched as I looked about me— if this

wasn't heaven, then what was?

I sighed, contented. Could this evening be more perfect?

"Madge?" The tenderness in his voice never failed to pull at me, melt my resolve. To think that I had been too scared, too scared to let myself be vulnerable and open myself to the possibility of love. Yet, the rewards had been hundredfold. I met his gaze, that soft, slow-burning melt of a gaze that had arrested me from the very beginning.

"What's wrong?" I said, as he got down on his knees. Then my heart stopped, before re-starting in a slow motion chugga-chugga.

"Madge Everson, I love the way you organize your tea collection. I love the way you think shoes need to be housed before bedtime. I love the way you tilt your head when you're listening. I love the way you think every problem can be solved with coffee first. I love the way you're out there building your business, making it grow. I love the way you're the first thing I think of every night, and that I get to wake up to you in the mornings. I want to know that feeling for the rest of my life. Marry me, Madge?"

My throat constricted as tears welled behind my eyes. He plucked a strand of long grass and wound it round my finger.

I started to giggle. "Don't you know anything? Where's the ring?"

He threw his hands up in mock horror. "Oh, that's right, the rules. Who says there has to be a ring?"

"Well, *everyone*, obviously," I carried on, laughing through my tears.

"Is that a yes then?"

I nodded. "Yes, yes, Jacques de Villiers."

My heart somersaulted with joy as I reached for him, and he took me in his arms, his mouth hungry on mine. What if I hadn't agreed to go out with him? What if I'd said no like I'd wanted to? *Cool it with the what ifs Everson*. This was real, and was happening—no ifs, ands, or buts.

Jacques wiped away my tears. "Thank heavens you said yes. I wouldn't have known what to do with this."

From one of the backpack pockets he pulled out a ring, with which he

replaced the grass makeshift one.

“I think I may have liked the other one better,” I quipped, staring down at the platinum band. My Camel man. I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

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